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| http://www.themodernword.com/joyce/cleardot.GIFBook through eternity junction |
| http://www.themodernword.com/joyce/cleardot.GIF"Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth."http://www.themodernword.com/joyce/cleardot.GIF–Pablo Picassohttp://www.themodernword.com/joyce/cleardot.GIFThe Artfull Eye, or: Why Read James Joyce?http://www.themodernword.com/joyce/cleardot.GIFJames Joyce was not exactly what one would call a prolific writer, having produced only a handful of poems, two plays, a single book of short stories, and just three complete "novels." If you piled all these works on top of each other, it still wouldn't be the size of Dostoevsky's shopping list. And yet this small stack towers over our century, and its unforgettable shadow touches us even on our postmodern doorstep – and beyond.http://www.themodernword.com/joyce/cleardot.GIFRather than sheer quantity, a better physical measurement for Joyce's writings might be density, the ratio of mass/volume. Joyce's works are compact, each book a small universe of riches and complexities, with meaning folded upon meaning until the words themselves seem to vibrate. In the periodic table of literature, Joyce might occupy the place of plutonium: massively dense and inherently destabilizing, his work contains the energy needed to explode established perceptions, and yet when harnessed, may power the engines needed to explore past the wreckage. Like a force of nature, Joyce's writing can be demanding, unrepentant, and merciless – but at the same time beautiful, mysterious, and compelling. In the world of English letters, Joyce compares only to Shakespeare, and it would be hard to imagine the course of modern literature without him.http://www.themodernword.com/joyce/cleardot.GIFAnd yet, whenever people like me write florid, gushing paragraphs like the one above, the inevitable question always arises: if Joyce is indeed so wonderful, revolutionary, and influential, why haven't more people read him? Why is he considered so bloody *difficult*? Indeed, even among people who count themselves as well-read, *Ulysses* is occasionally used as something of an acid test; and more than a few academics have dismissed *Finnegans Wake* as an "impossible" work. Many find the prospect of reading Joyce to be simply *daunting*.http://www.themodernword.com/joyce/cleardot.GIFWell, let's be honest here. It's not just a myth – Joyce *is* difficult. Many frustrated readers complain that his books are hopelessly convoluted and deliberately obscure. Nor does it help that Joyce has a reputation of being an "academic" writer. Some alienated readers feel that the world of academia has claimed Joyce all to themselves, their mountains of criticism lifting him to such lofty heights that only a genius can understand his work. Like Shakespeare, Joyce exists in the minds of these potential readers as some vague, distant figure, an obscure but somehow important deity in the Western pantheon, not meant for the layman and best left to his own priesthood. But even if we pry Joyce out of the hands of the professors – who, after all, are writing more about other professors writing about other professors writing about Joyce than they are writing about Joyce himself – the question remains: with so many more accessible – and *good* – writers around, why read Joyce? Why spend that much time on a single author?http://www.themodernword.com/joyce/cleardot.GIFAll valid concerns, of course.... And yet....http://www.themodernword.com/joyce/cleardot.GIFAsk anyone who's read *Ulysses,* and chances are that it's one of their favorite books. There are people who have reread *Finnegans Wake* a dozen times, each time through discovering a delightful treasure of new words, punning double-meanings, and challenging puzzles. Look in any good bookstore and you will find a veritable "crossmess parzel" of Joyce criticism, from comprehensive annotations the size of bibles to curious little pamphlets with baffling titles like "The Engines of Thoth – Time in FW." Search the Web and you'll find over a hundred sites devoted specifically to Joyce, ranging from pages of scholarly interpretation to a site run by some ambitious (and cheerfully demented) guy who's scanning in every page of a first edition *Ulysses.* (You may even find a site run by a former chemistry teacher who has a weird affinity for small birds, and seems to think his site is a pub. It takes all kinds.) There are Joyce foundations and organizations by the dozen, Joyce reading groups, Joyce drinking clubs, Joyce symphonies and oratorios, Joyce pub-crawls, Joyce Discordian societies, a Joyce literary marathon, and even an unofficial world-wide holiday called Bloomsday – June 16th, the day *Ulysses*takes place. Surely all this is not the result of some crazed Paddy who tossed off incomprehensible works that no one lacking an Oxford degree can read?http://www.themodernword.com/joyce/cleardot.GIFSurely not, but still: Why read Joyce?http://www.themodernword.com/joyce/cleardot.GIFBecause when read patiently, eagerly, and, yes, maybe a little crazily, his work offers up an abundance of rich rewards matched only by that Elizabethan fellow I keep mentioning. Joyce was a writer dedicated to recording human nature with as much authenticity as possible, with all its attendant satisfactions, hesitations, doubts, revelations, joys, delusions, and disappointments; and if that commitment lead him from the opera house to the outhouse, from the cathedral to the brothel, and from the open pub to the open grave, his pen was never reluctant to follow his instincts. But the hand that held that pen was guided by the muse of genius, and Joyce knew that he could do much more than *record* life, he could try his best to*capture* it, to pin it down to the page, heart still beating, frail wings undamaged. And if that took some radical rethinking of his instrument, then so be it: prose style, narrative technique, even language itself would all be bent to his will, and he took a fierce delight in playing with his medium – but all to a purpose; in Joyce, there is always a purpose.http://www.themodernword.com/joyce/cleardot.GIFSo is Joyce difficult? Yes, but so is life. If Joyce's writing is dense, it is because even our most mundane thoughts are surprisingly multilayered. If it is elusive, it is because our minds do not always follow the logic of wake-a-day grammar. If it is filled with obscure allusions, it is because we first learn universal truths through their reflections in the immediate world around us. If his prose twists and turns like a maze, it is because the infinite convolutions of the human heart demand no less an honest account. To read Joyce is, as he himself put it, to read "as human a little story as paper could well carry." And, to return a last time to Shakespeare, like the Bard, Joyce's works are truly meant for *everyone* – not just professors; but plumbers, printers, and pubcrawlers, too. Anyone who has ever grown teary-eyed over a sad song, fought for a lost cause, or tried to capture their first kiss with a slipshoddy poem written on the back of an envelope; anyone with a desire to say *yes* to the great question of existence.http://www.themodernword.com/joyce/cleardot.GIFSo why read Joyce? Because in the artful eye of his prose, in the art-full lie of his fiction, Joyce is reading us. Allen B. Ruch, Lughnasa  |

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