

24.19

Hebrews Humor in Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*

Finnegan's Wake, published in 1939, was the final novel by Irish writer James Joyce. Although it is consistently named by critics as one of the best works of the twentieth century, it has not been widely read by the general public. This is in part due to how almost the entire work is written in an idiosyncratic language that approximates English lexically. For the enlightened, however, the text is replete with linguistic puns and other word plays, enhanced by literary allusions and free associations.

A classic example of the humor evident in *Finnegan's Wake* may be seen in the author's reference to "the farced epistol to the hibruws." Sounding out the words, we realize he is talking about a biblical book, "the First Epistle to the Hebrews." A further joke is embedded in the reference, however, because as Joyce well knew (but thought his readers might not), there is only one Epistle to the Hebrews in the Bible. It is pompously nonsensical to speak of the "First Epistle to the Hebrews" when there is no Second.

The student-friendly website Schmoop.com notes all the above and observes, "You know you're high-brow when your jokes need footnotes."