

Sunsets and Sunrises: James Joyce and Richard Linklater's *Before* Trilogy

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The influence of James Joyce has been far-reaching and unexpected, spanning both national borders and artistic mediums. Richard Linklater, a contemporary American filmmaker who created *Slacker* (1991), *Boyhood* (2014), and the *Before* trilogy, is an example of this.

Though Linklater's films may seem to have little in common with Joyce's modernist prose, they in fact owe a great deal to the writer. If you haven't seen it already, I'd like to introduce you to the *Before* trilogy — three films that chronicle a single romantic relationship spanning the course of eighteen years. And if you have seen the films, I'd like to point out the trilogy's numerous connections to *Ulysses* (1922). Did you notice them the first time you watched the movies?

Before Sunrise

Before Sunrise (1995), like *Ulysses*, takes place on June 16. This date marks the first walk that Joyce took with his future wife, Nora Barnacle, and *Before Sunrise* chronicles the chance encounter and subsequent romantic wanderings of Jesse and Céline. Jesse's name is really James, and like Joyce, he is an aspiring writer who spends a great deal of time walking through European cities. Jesse recites lines from the poem *As I Walked Out One Evening* by W.H. Auden, a 20th century writer whose prolific body of work contains some highly modernist pieces. Incidentally — though Linklater has never commented on this specific connection — Joyce did translate a play by Gerhart Hauptmann into English, titled *Vor Sonnenaufgang*, or *Before Sunrise*.

Before Sunset



Julie Delpy as Céline, and Ethan Hawke as Jesse, in *Before Sunset*.
Photo Source: [Wikipedia Commons](#)

Just as Joyce used memories of his romantic encounter on June 16th as inspiration for *Ulysses*, Jesse too goes on to write a novel about his meeting with Céline. In *Before Sunset* (2004), Jesse launches his book at the Parisian bookstore Shakespeare & Company — whose first iteration published *Ulysses* in 1922.

Paris, the city where Jesse and Céline eventually settle down, was also one of the places where Joyce and Nora lived after leaving Dublin. Music features prominently in the two works — Molly and Céline are talented singers — and both have a pet cat.

Before Midnight

The trilogy's final installment, *Before Midnight*, is set in Greece, which is notably the birthplace of Homer and *The Odyssey*. By now, Jesse and Céline have two children together, just as Joyce and Nora — and Molly and Leopold — did. At one point, Céline describes a scene from a film that touched her deeply: a couple visits Pompeii and observes the ancient bodies perfectly preserved in volcanic ash. The film she is talking about, Rossellini's *Journey to Italy* (1954), pays homage to Joyce's short story *The Dead*, and the film's two protagonists are named Katherine and Alex Joyce. In addition to all of this, Jesse and Céline's relationship in this film most closely resembles that of Molly and Leopold's relationship in *Ulysses* — fraught with difficulties and dishonesty, but simultaneously filled with love and happy memories.

Joyce's Continued Cinematic Legacy

Films need not be direct adaptations in order to stay true to the works that inspired them, as Joyce's impact on Richard Linklater's oeuvre demonstrates. Considering the fact that Joyce himself opened the first movie theatre in Ireland — the Volta Cinematograph in 1909 — I think there's a good chance that he would be pleased to know his works have influenced filmmakers almost a century later.

If you're in the mood to stay in and watch a few romantic films this February, give the trilogy a try. And let me know if you spot any other Joyce allusions at our next reading group session of *Ulysses* on March 2 at 7pm, at *The School of Irish Studies* at Concordia. I'd be happy to hear about what you discovered and compare notes!