

84 QUOTATIONS



William Dean Howells

(1837-1920)

William Dean Howells was a literary pioneer who led the Realist movement in American fiction as a powerful editor at the *Atlantic Monthly* for many years, as author of 38 realistic novels and as an influential booster of Mark Twain, Henry James, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Hamlin Garland and others. Born on the frontier, he fled to the respectability of Boston. His best known novel, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), is set in Boston and is typical of his fiction in its objective depiction of representative social types in a story with historical perspective, interwoven literary traditions, rounded characters, a Neoclassical dramatic structure, local color, authentic details, humor and a moral in the Victorian tradition. The Realism of Howells is so much limited by his Victorianism that Sinclair Lewis belittled as well as praising him in his Nobel Prize address in 1930. Though his gentility is out of date, Howells remains instructive, entertaining and easy to read.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, autobiographical, idealism, suffering, disillusionment, utilitarianism, Socialism, Puritanism, Victorianism, gentility, women, rebellion of Realist, literature, American literature, Romantic literature, Realism vs Romance, Realism, Austen, Turgeniev, Naturalism, Nature, human nature, real life, the commonplace, religion, death, advice:

YOUTH

What I wished to do always and evermore was to think and dream and talk literature, and literature only.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

The mortality of all inanimate things is terrible to me, but that of books most of all.

Essaying has been the enemy of the novelist that was in me. One can not do both without hurt to both.

I find every man interesting, whether he thinks or unthinks, whether he is savage or civilized.

The secret of the man who is universally interesting is that he is universally interested.

The Bostonian who leaves Boston ought to be condemned to perpetual exile.

Some people can stay longer in an hour than others can in a week.

IDEALISM

No book written with a low or cynical motive could succeed now.

The wrecks of slavery are fast growing a fungus crop of sentiment.

If we like a man's dream, we call him a reformer; if we don't like his dream, we call him a crank.

Yes, people that have convictions are difficult. Fortunately, they're rare.

SUFFERING

Each of us must suffer long to himself before he can learn that he is but one in a great community of wretchedness which has been pitilessly repeating itself from the foundation of the world.

DISILLUSIONMENT

After fifty years of optimistic content with 'civilization' and its ability to come out all right in the end, I now abhor it, and feel that it is coming out all wrong in the end, unless it bases itself on a real equality. Meantime, I wear a furlined overcoat, and live in all the luxury my money can buy. [to Henry James]

UTILITARIANISM

The action is best that secures the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

SOCIALISM

The world is what it must be from the selfish motives which underlie our economic life.

We shall not have fraternity, human brotherhood, without trying for it. From nature, it did not come; it came from the heart of man, who in the midst of nature is above it.

PURITANISM

An acre of performance is worth a whole world of promise.

It is the still, small voice that the soul heeds, not the deafening blasts of doom.

VICTORIANISM

I am still very Victorian in my preference of decency.

My longing was for the cleanly respectabilities.

Kindness and gentleness are never out of fashion.

Morality penetrates all things, it is the soul of all things.

They were Americans, and they knew how to worship a woman.

Wisdom and goodness are twin-born, one heart must hold both sisters, never seen apart.

What is unpretentious and what is true is always beautiful and good, and nothing else is so.

It often happens in the country that you find the women practicing some of the arts of civilization, while their menfolk are still sunk in barbaric uses.

The conqueror is regarded with awe; the wise man commands our respect; but it is only the benevolent man that wins our affection.

A man never sees all that his mother has been to him until it's too late to let her know that he sees it.

GENTILITY

They are rather helplessly frank, but not, I hope, with all their rather helpless frankness, offensively frank.

The bohemians were the beginning and the end of the story for me, and to tell the truth I did not like the story.

I am a great admirer of French workmanship, and I read everything of Zola's that I can lay hands on. But I have to hide the books from the children!

Most of these critics who demand "passion" would seem to have no conception of any passion but one. Yet there are several other passions...and all these have a greater part in the drama of life than the passion of love, and infinitely greater than the passion of guilty love.

The novel in our civilization now always addresses a mixed company, and...the vast majority of the company are ladies, and...very many, if not most, of these ladies are young girls...it is a question of writing, under cover of our universal acceptance, things for young girls to read...

Between the editor of a reputable English or American magazine and the families which receive it there is a tacit agreement that he will print nothing which a father may not read to his daughter, or safely leave her to read herself.

I believe fiction in the past to have been largely injurious, as I believe the stage play to be still almost wholly injurious, through its falsehood, its folly, its wantonness, and its aimlessness.

If a novel flatters the passions, and exalts them above the principles, it is poisonous; it may not kill, but it will certainly injure.

Though it is not the business of art to preach morality, still I think that, resting on a divine and spiritual principle, like the idea of the beautiful, it is perforce moral.

WOMEN

Her mouth is a honey-blossom, / No doubt, as the poet sings; / But within her lips, the petals, / Lurks a cruel bee that stings.

The man of letters must make up his mind that in the United States the fate of a book is in the hands of the women.

REBELLION OF A REALIST

In what fatal hour did the Young Girl arise and seal the lips of Fiction, with a touch of her finger, to some of the most vital interests of life?

LITERATURE

All civilization comes through literature now, especially in our country.

AMERICAN LITERATURE

What the American public wants in the theater is a tragedy with a happy ending.

I would have our American novelists be as American as they unconsciously can.

In Europe life is histrionic and dramatized, and in America it is direct and sincere.

It seems to me that we are in a fair way to have a pretty good school of really native American fiction.

It will not do to boast, but it is well to be true to the facts, and to see that, apart from these purely mortal troubles, the race here has enjoyed conditions in which most of the ills that have darkened its annals might be averted by honest work and unselfish behavior.

Our novelists, therefore, concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life, which are the more American, and seek the universal in the individual rather than the social interests.

I am not sure the Americans have not brought the short story nearer perfection in the all-round sense than almost any other people.

[Henry James is] gifted enough to do better than anyone has yet done toward making us a real American novel.... But I suspect that he must in a great degree create his audience.

Your voice is like a thrush's in the din of all the literary noise that stuns us so. [to Sarah Orne Jewett]

Clemens was sole, incomparable, the Lincoln of our literature.

ROMANTIC LITERATURE

These novels with old-fashioned heroes and heroines in them—are ruinous.

Recognize that [Sir Walter Scott] often wrote a style cumbrous and diffuse; that he was tediously analytical where the modern novelist is dramatic, and evolved his characters by means of long-winded explanation and commentary; that, except in the case of his lower-class personages, he made them talk as seldom man and never woman talked; that he was tiresomely descriptive; that on the simplest occasions he went about half a mile to express a thought that could be uttered in ten paces...

The young writer...is instructed to idealize his personages, that is, to take the life-likeness out of them, and put the book-likeness into them.

Artists in general, and poets principally, have been confined in so narrow a circle; they have been rather imitators of one another than of nature.

Poetry, it will more and more come to be understood, is nothing but higher knowledge; and the only genuine Romance (for grown persons), Reality.

REALISM vs ROMANCE

“The novelists might be the greatest possible help to us if they painted life as it is, and human feelings in their true proportion and relation, but for the most part they have been and are altogether noxious.”
[Reverend Sewell in *Silas Lapham*]

The people who have been brought up on the ideal grasshopper, the heroic grasshopper, the impassioned grasshopper, the self-devoted, adventurous, good old romantic cardboard grasshopper must die out before the simple, honest, and natural grasshopper can have a fair field.

Whatever is established is sacred with those who do not think. At the beginning of the century, when romance was making the same fight against effete classicism which realism is making to-day against effete romanticism, the Italian poet Monti declared that "the romantic was the cold grave of the Beautiful," just as the realistic is now supposed to be. The romantic of that day and the real of this are in certain degree the same. Romanticism then sought, as realism seeks now, to widen the bounds of sympathy, to level every barrier against aesthetic freedom, to escape from the paralysis of tradition. It exhausts itself in this impulse; and it remained for realism to assert that fidelity to experience and probability of motive are essential conditions of a great imaginative literature.

REALISM

Good art...is never anything but the reflection of life.

Ah! Poor Real Life, which I love, can I make others share the delight I find in thy foolish and insipid face?

Dispersing the conventional acceptations by which men live on easy terms with themselves, and obliging them to examine the grounds of their social and moral opinions.

Let not the novelists, then, endeavor to add anything to reality, to turn it and twist it, to restrict it. Since nature has endowed them with this precious gift of discovering ideas in things, their work will be beautiful if they paint these as they appear.

Realism is nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material, and Jane Austen was the first and last of the English novelists to treat material with entire truthfulness. [Neoclassicism]

AUSTEN

How...could people who had once known the simple verity, the refined perfection of Miss Austen, enjoy anything less refined and less perfect? [Neoclassical aesthetics]

The art of fiction, as Jane Austen knew it, declined from her through Scott, and Bulwer, and Dickens, and Charlotte Bronte, and Thackeray, and even George Eliot, because the mania of romanticism had seized upon all Europe.

TURGENIEV

Life showed itself to me in different colors, after I had once read Turgeniev; it became more serious, more awful, and with mystical responsibilities I had not known before.

NATURALISM

The extreme naturalists have refused to make the old discrimination against [ugliness], or to regard the ugly as any less worthy of celebration in art than the beautiful; some of them, in fact, seem to regard it as rather more worthy, if anything.

NATURE

No author is an authority except in those moments when he held his ear close to Nature's lips and caught her very accent.

We shall come to comprehend with more instinctive certitude what is simple, natural, and honest.

HUMAN NATURE

The time is coming, I hope, when each new author, each new artist, will be considered, not in his proportion to any other author or artist, but in his relation to the human nature, known to us all, which it is his privilege, his high duty, to interpret.

We must ask ourselves before we ask anything else, Is it true?—true to the motives, the impulses, the principles that shape the life of actual men and women?

In the whole range of fiction we know of no true picture of life—that is, of human nature—which is not also a masterpiece of literature, full of divine and natural beauty.

I have my little theory that human nature is elementally much the same always and everywhere, and that if the man of intelligence will study his own heart he will know pretty well what all other men have been in essentials.

Men are more alike than unlike one another...let us make them know one another better, that they may be all humbled and strengthened with a sense of their fraternity.

REAL LIFE

But let fiction cease to lie about life; let it portray men and women as they are, actuated by the motives and passions in the measure we all know; let it leave off painting dolls and working them by springs and wires; let it show the different interests in their true proportions; let it forbear to teach pride and revenge, folly and insanity, egotism and prejudice, but frankly own these for what they are, in whatever figures and occasions they appear; let it not put on fine literary airs; let it speak the dialect, the language, that most Americans know—the language of unaffected people everywhere—and there can be no doubt of an unlimited future, not only of delightfulness but of usefulness, for it.

THE COMMONPLACE

Hitherto the mass of common men have been afraid to apply their own simplicity, naturalness, and honesty to the appreciation of the beautiful.

It is the conception of literature as something apart from life, superfinely aloof, which makes it really unimportant to the great mass of mankind.

They bray at my flowers picked from the fruitful fields of our common life, and turn aside among the thistles with keen appetites for the false and impossible.

Every true realist...finds nothing insignificant; all tells for destiny and character; nothing that God has made is contemptible. He cannot look upon human life and declare this thing or that thing unworthy of notice, any more than the scientist can declare a fact of the material world beneath the dignity of his inquiry. He feels in every nerve the equality of things and the unity of men; his soul is exalted, not by vain shows and shadows and ideals, but by realities, in which alone the truth lives.

I am not sorry for having wrought in common, crude material so much; that is the right American stuff; and perhaps hereafter, when my din is done, if anyone is curious to know what that noise was, it will be found to have proceeded from a small insect which was scraping about on the surface of our life and trying to get into its meaning for the sake of the other insects larger or smaller. That is, such has been my unconscious work; consciously, I was always, as I still am, trying to fashion a piece of literature out of the life next at hand.

RELIGION

Primitive societies without religion have never been found.

DEATH

He who sleeps in continual noise is wakened by silence.

ADVICE

Live all you can. It's a mistake not to. It doesn't matter what you do—but live. This place makes it all come over me. I see it now. I haven't done so—and now I'm old. It's too late. It's gone past me. I've lost it. You have time. You are young. *Live!* [Howells was the model for Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors* (1903) by Henry James, who emphasizes this theme also in "The Beast in the Jungle."]

