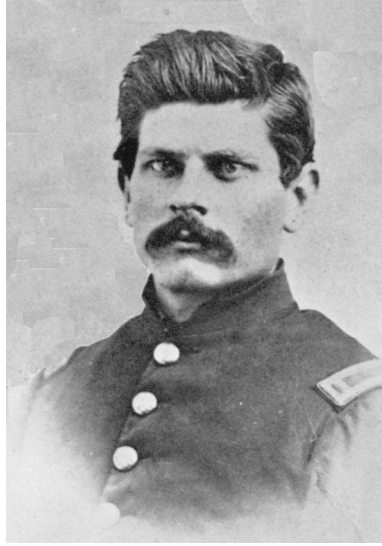


198 QUOTATIONS



Ambrose Bierce

(1842-1914?)

Ambrose “Bitter” Bierce is the bitterest wit in American literature, rivaled only by the later Mark Twain and by H. L. Mencken. A legendary Civil War hero, he got turned into a cynic by the carnage of the war and never recovered. He was handsome, articulate, and magnetic to women, but so hardened by brutal experience he distanced himself from everyone including his wife and children. He was kind to animals and cruel in neglecting his family. After the war he worked as an engineer and mining company manager, then became famous as a journalist and literary writer in San Francisco, where he knew Twain, Bret Harte and Jack London. His vision is Gothic in the tradition of Poe, his fictional mode is ironic Naturalism and his technique at his best, as in “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” is vivid Impressionism equal to Stephen Crane. In 1914 Bierce disappeared into Mexico where he joined the revolutionary army of Pancho Villa and was never heard from again.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, autobiographical, reply to Descartes, reply to Wordsworth, replies to Franklin, doubt, politics, war, human nature, knowledge, gambling, emotional distance, murder, evolution, women, history, *The Devil’s Dictionary* (1911), death:

YOUTH

I was born to poor because of honest parents.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

Success is the one unpardonable sin against our fellows.

The covers of this book are too far apart.

REPLY TO DESCARTES

I think that I think, therefore I think that I am.

REPLY TO WORDSWORTH

Heaven lies about us in our infancy and the world begins lying about us pretty soon afterward.

REPLIES TO FRANKLIN

A bird in the hand is worth what it will bring.

A man is known by the company he organizes.

Strike while your employer has a big contract.

Where there's a will there's a won't.

Think twice before you speak to a friend in need.

A penny saved is a penny to squander.

Better late than before anybody has invited you.

He laughs best who laughs least.

DOUBT

Doubt is the father of invention.

Doubt begins only at the last frontiers of what is possible.

It is evident that skepticism, while it makes no actual change in man, always makes him feel better.

Men become civilized, not in proportion to their willingness to believe, but in proportion to their readiness to doubt.

Doubt, indulged and cherished, is in danger of becoming denial; but if honest, and bent on thorough investigation, it may soon lead to full establishment of the truth.

A person who doubts himself is like a man who would enlist in the ranks of his enemies and bear arms against himself. He makes his failure certain by himself being the first person to be convinced of it.

When you doubt, abstain.

POLITICS

An absolute monarchy is one in which the sovereign does as he pleases so long as he pleases the assassins.

Democracy is four wolves and a lamb voting on what to have for lunch.

We submit to the majority because we have to. But we are not compelled to call our attitude of subjection a posture of respect.

I never said Democrats were saloonkeepers. What I said was that all saloonkeepers are Democrats.

What is a Democrat? One who believes that the Republicans have ruined the country. What is a Republican? One who believes that the Democrats would ruin the country.

In our civilization, and under our republican form of government, intelligence is so highly honored that it is rewarded by exemption from the cares of office.

WAR

What this country needs, what every country needs occasionally is a good hard bloody war to revive the vice of patriotism on which its existence as a nation depends. [echo of Thomas Jefferson]

The slightest acquaintance with history shows that powerful republics are the most warlike and unscrupulous of nations.

We know what happens to people who stay in the middle of the road. They get run over.

HUMAN NATURE

The fact that boys are allowed to exist at all is evidence of a remarkable Christian forbearance among men.

Spring beckons! All things to the call respond; the trees are leafing and cashiers abscond.

Speak when you are angry and you will make the best speech you will ever regret.

Ability is commonly found to consist mainly in a high degree of solemnity.

A total abstainer is one who abstains from everything but abstention.

KNOWLEDGE

All are lunatics, but he who can analyze his delusions is called a philosopher.

There is nothing new under the sun but there are lots of things we don't know.

The small part of ignorance that we arrange and classify we give the name of knowledge.

Experience is revelation in the light of which we renounce our errors of youth for those of age.

GAMBLING

The hardest tumble a man can make is to fall over his own bluff.

The gambling known as business looks with austere disfavor upon the business known as gambling.

EMOTIONAL DISTANCE

I believe we shall come to care about people less and less. The more people one knows the easier it becomes to replace them. It's one of the curses of London.

Absence blots people out. We really have no absent friends.

MURDER

There are four kinds of homicide: felonious, excusable, justifiable, and praiseworthy.

EVOLUTION

Those who are horrified by Mr. Darwin's theory may comfort themselves with the assurance that, if we are descended from the ape, we have not descended so far as to preclude all hope of return.

WOMEN

Women in love are less ashamed than men. They have less to be ashamed of.

The best thing to do with the best things in life is to give them up.

The most affectionate creature in the world is a wet dog.

HISTORY

History is an account, mostly false, of events, mostly unimportant, which are brought about by rulers, mostly knaves, and soldiers, mostly fools.

God alone knows the future, but only an historian can alter the past.

from *The Devil's Dictionary* (1911)

Abscond: To move in a mysterious way, commonly with the property of another.

Abstainer: A weak person who yields to the temptation of denying himself a pleasure.

Absurdity: A statement or belief manifestly inconsistent with one's own opinion.

Academe: An ancient school where morality and philosophy were taught.

Academy: A modern school where football is taught.

Acquaintance: A person whom we know well enough to borrow from, but not well enough to lend to.

Admiration: Our polite recognition of another's resemblance to ourselves.

Alliance: In international politics, the union of two thieves who have their hands so deeply inserted in each other's pockets that they cannot separately plunder a third.

Ambidextrous: Able to pick with equal skill a right-hand pocket or a left.

Ambition: An overmastering desire to be vilified by enemies while living and made ridiculous by friends when dead.

Amnesty: The state's magnanimity to those offenders whom it would be too expensive to punish.

Anoint: To grease a king or other great functionary already sufficiently slippery.

Apologize: To lay the foundation for a future offense.

Applause: The echo of a platitude.

Architect: One who drafts a plan of your house, and plans a draft of your money.

Ardor: The quality that distinguishes love without knowledge.

Bacchus: A convenient deity invented by the ancients as an excuse for getting drunk.

Backbite: To speak of a man as you find him when he can't find you.

Battle: A method of untying with the teeth a political knot that would not yield to the tongue.

Beauty: The power by which a woman charms a lover and terrifies a husband.

Belladonna: In Italian a beautiful lady; in English a deadly poison. A striking example of the essential identity of the two tongues.

Bigamy: A mistake in taste for which the wisdom of the future will adjudge a punishment called trigamy.

Bigot: One who is obstinately and zealously attached to an opinion that you do not entertain.

Bore: A person who talks when you wish him to listen.

Brain: An apparatus with which we think we think.

Bride: A woman with a fine prospect of happiness behind her.

Cabbage: A familiar kitchen-garden vegetable about as large and wise as a man's head.

Calamities are of two kinds: misfortunes to ourselves, and good fortune to others.

Childhood: The period of human life intermediate between the idiocy of infancy and the folly of youth—two removes from the sin of manhood and three from the remorse of age.

Christian: One who follows the teachings of Christ insofar as they are not inconsistent with a life of sin.

Christian: One who believes that the New Testament is a divinely inspired book admirably suited to the spiritual needs of his neighbor.

Clairvoyant: A person, commonly a woman, who has the power of seeing that which is invisible to her patron—namely, that he is a blockhead.

Clarinet: An instrument of torture operated by a person with cotton in his ears.

Compromise: Such an adjustment of conflicting interests as gives each adversary the satisfaction of thinking he has got what he ought not to have.

Confidante: One entrusted by A with the secrets of B confided to herself by C.

Congratulation: The civility of envy.

Conservative: A statesman who is enamored of existing evils, as distinguished from the Liberal who wishes to replace them with others.

Consul: In American politics, a person who having failed to secure an office from the people is given one by the Administration on condition that he leave the country.

Consult: To seek approval for a course of action already decided upon.

Convent: A place of retirement for women who wish for leisure to meditate upon the sin of idleness.

Conversation: A fair for the display of the minor mental commodities, each exhibitor being too intent upon the arrangement of his own wares to observe those of his neighbor.

Corporation: An ingenious device for obtaining profit without individual responsibility.

Coward: One who, in a perilous emergency, thinks with his legs.

Cribbage: A substitute for conversation among those to whom nature has denied ideas.

Curiosity: An objectionable quality of the female mind. The desire to know whether or not a woman is cursed with curiosity is one of the most active and insatiable passions of the masculine soul.

Cynic: A blackguard whose faulty vision sees things as they are, not as they ought to be.

Dawn: When men of reason go to bed.

Day: A period of twenty-four hours, mostly misspent.

Debt: An ingenious substitute for the chain and whip of the slavedriver.

Deliberation: The act of examining one's bread to determine which side it is buttered on.

Destiny: A tyrant's authority for crime and a fool's excuse for failure.

Dictionary: A malevolent literary device for cramping the growth of a language.

Diplomacy: The patriotic art of lying for one's country.

Disobedience: The silver lining to the cloud of servitude.

Divorce: A resumption of diplomatic relations and rectification of boundaries.

Dog: A kind of additional or subsidiary Deity designed to catch the overflow and surplus of the world's worship.

Duty: That which sternly impels us in the direction of profit, along the line of desire.

Edible: Good to eat and wholesome to digest, as a worm to a toad, a toad to a snake, a snake to a pig, a pig to a man, and a man to a worm.

Education: That which discloses to the wise and disguises from the foolish their lack of understanding.

Egotism: Doing the *New York Times* crossword puzzle with a pen.

Egotist: A person more interested in himself than in me.

Eloquence: The art of orally persuading fools that white is the color that it appears to be. It includes the gift of making any color appear white.

Enthusiasm: A distemper of youth, curable by small doses of repentance in connection with outward applications of experience.

Erudition: Dust shaken out of a book into an empty skull.

Eulogy: Praise of a person who has either the advantages of wealth and power, or the consideration to be dead.

Experience: The wisdom that enables us to recognize in an undesirable old acquaintance the folly that we have already embraced.

Extinction: The raw material out of which theology created the future state.

Faith: Belief without evidence in what is told by one who speaks without knowledge, of things without parallel.

Famous: Conspicuously miserable.

Fidelity: A virtue peculiar to those who are about to be betrayed.

Forgetfulness: A gift of God bestowed upon debtors in compensation for their destitution of conscience.

Fork: An instrument used chiefly for the purpose of putting dead animals into the mouth.

Friendless: Having no favors to bestow. Destitute of fortune. Addicted to utterance of truth and common sense.

Future: That period of time in which our affairs prosper, our friends are true and our happiness is assured.

Genealogy: An account of one's descent from a man who did not particularly care to trace his own.

Genius: To know without having learned; to draw just conclusions from unknown premises; to discern the soul of things.

Ghost: The outward and visible sign of an inward fear.

Happiness: An agreeable sensation arising from contemplating the misery of another.

Heathen: A benighted creature who has the folly to worship something that he can see and feel.

Historian: A broad-gauge gossip.

Humanity: The human race, collectively, exclusive of the anthropoid poets.

Immortality: A toy which people cry for, and on their knees apply for, dispute, contend and lie for, and if allowed would be right proud eternally to die for.

Impartial: Unable to perceive any promise of personal advantage from espousing either side of a controversy.

Impiety: Your irreverence toward my deity.

Incompatibility: In matrimony a similarity of tastes, particularly the taste for domination.

Inhumanity: One of the signal and characteristic qualities of humanity.

Insurance: An ingenious modern game of chance in which the player is permitted to enjoy the comfortable conviction that he is beating the man who keeps the table.

Inventor: A person who makes an ingenious arrangement of wheels, levers and springs, and believes it civilization.

Irreligion: The principal one of the great faiths of the world.

Jealous: Unduly concerned about the preservation of that which can be lost only if not worth keeping.

Language: The music with which we charm the serpents guarding another's treasure.

Laughter: An interior convulsion, producing a distortion of the features.

Lawsuit: A machine which you go into as a pig and come out of as a sausage.

Lawyer: One skilled in circumvention of the law.

Laziness: Unwarranted repose of manner in a person of low degree.

Learning: The kind of ignorance distinguishing the studious.

Life: A spiritual pickle preserving the body from decay.

Litigant: A person about to give up his skin for the hope of retaining his bones.

Logic: The art of thinking and reasoning in strict accordance with the limitations and incapacities of the human misunderstanding.

Lottery: A tax on people who are bad at math.

Love: A temporary insanity curable by marriage.

Mad: Afflicted with a high degree of intellectual independence.

Marriage: The state or condition of a community consisting of a master, a mistress, and two slaves, making in all, two.

Mayonnaise: One of the sauces which serve the French in place of a state religion.

Meekness: Uncommon patience in planning a revenge that is worth while.

Mind: Its chief activity consists in the endeavor to ascertain its own nature, the futility of the attempt being due to the fact that it has nothing but itself to know itself with.

Nihilist: A Russian who denies the existence of anything but Tolstoi.

Novel: A short story padded.

Ocean: A body of water occupying about two-thirds of a world made for man—who has no gills.

Opportunity: A favorable occasion for grasping a disappointment.

Optimism: The doctrine or belief that everything is beautiful, including what is ugly.

Optimist: A proponent of the doctrine that black is white.

Painting: The art of protecting flat surfaces from the weather, and exposing them to the critic.

Patience: A minor form of despair, disguised as a virtue.

Patriotism: Combustible rubbish ready to the torch of any one ambitious to illuminate his name.

Peace: In international affairs, a period of cheating between periods of fighting.

Perseverance: A lowly virtue whereby mediocrity achieves an inglorious success.

Philosophy: A route of many roads leading from nowhere to nothing.

Phonograph: An irritating toy that restores life to dead noises.

Photograph: A picture painted by the sun without instruction in art.

Platitude: A thought that snores in words that smoke.

Politeness: The most acceptable hypocrisy.

Politics: A strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles. The conduct of public affairs for private advantage.

Positive: Mistaken at the top of one's voice.

Pray: To ask that the laws of the universe be annulled on behalf of a single petitioner confessedly unworthy.

Prejudice: A vagrant opinion without visible means of support.

Prescription: A physician's guess at what will best prolong the situation with least harm to the patient.

Present: That part of eternity dividing the domain of disappointment from the realm of hope.

Quotation: The act of repeating erroneously the words of another.

Reason: To weigh probabilities in the scales of desire.

Religion: A daughter of Hope and Fear, explaining to Ignorance the nature of the Unknowable.

Revolution: In politics, an abrupt change in the form of misgovernment.

Riot: A popular entertainment given to the military by innocent bystanders.

Sabbath: A weekly festival having its origin in the fact that God made the world in six days and was arrested on the seventh.

Saint: A dead sinner revised and edited.

Scriptures: The sacred books of our holy religion, as distinguished from the false and profane writings on which all other faiths are based.

Self-evident: Evident to one's self and to nobody else.

Selfish: Devoid of consideration for the selfishness of others.

Suffrage: The right to vote for the man of another man's choice.

Sweater: Garment worn by a child when its mother is feeling chilly.

Telephone: An invention of the devil which abrogates some of the advantages of making a disagreeable person keep his distance.

Trial: A formal inquiry designed to prove and put upon record the blameless characters of judges, advocates and jurors.

Twice: Once too often.

Vote: The instrument and symbol of a freeman's power to make a fool of himself and a wreck of his country.

Wit: The salt with which the American humorist spoils his intellectual cookery by leaving it out.

Witticism: A sharp and clever remark, usually quoted and seldom noted; what the Philistine is pleased to call a joke.

DEATH

San Francisco is the place where most people were last seen.

Death is not the end. There remains the litigation over the estate.

You don't have to be a Christian...but it probably helps.

Speak of the Devil and he will hear about it.

