

## 142 QUOTATIONS



Willa Cather

(1873-1947)

Willa Cather became a great American novelist with *O Pioneers!* (1913)—identifying herself with the democratic spiritual tradition of Walt Whitman in affirming the westward movement—then continued at a high level of achievement with *The Song of the Lark* (1915), *My Antonia* (1918), and *A Lost Lady* (1923), peaking with *The Professor's House* (1925) and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). Together these works extend the myth of the Garden of the West dramatized in James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking saga into the farther West, into heroic agrarianism and on into the decadent modern world, doing for the West in literature what Faulkner did for the South. Cather combines more aesthetic traditions than any American writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Classical, French novel, German novel, Dutch genre painting, Neoclassical, Transcendental, Realist, and Modernist. Yet she is consistently modest and apparently plain. She excels at characterization—at rendering humanity—and is among the writers most capable of moving a reader deeply. At the same time, her work is a network of classical allusions, she is intellectually in a class with T.S. Eliot, her *Professor's House* is comparable to Hawthorne's allegories in complexity, and her Realism at its most holistic is numinous like Hemingway's best, imbued with an idealism symbolized by the Cliff City tower inside the Blue Mesa and personified in Tom Outland.

ORDER OF TOPICS: childhood, relationship, country and people, friends, frontier past, old Nebraska, current Nebraska, literary situation, mythic symbol, Nature, brute instincts, human nature, society, truth, reformers, women writers, women with careers, religion, Platonism, art, the artist, artistic salvation, Sappho, literature, short story and novel, Poe, American literature, style, Walt Whitman, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Mark Twain and Sarah Orne Jewett, Henry James and Edith Wharton, Stephen Crane, Kate Chopin, European literature, Realism, European Realism, local color, decadent Romanticism, Victorianism, Modernism, writing, intuition and intellect, range, implications, economy, her works, present age, death, epitaph:

### CHILDHOOD

Where there is great love, there are always wishes.

The fact that I was a girl never damaged my ambitions to be a pope or an emperor.

Some memories are realities, and are better than anything that can ever happen again.

When we look back, the only things we cherish are those which in some way met our original want; the desire which formed in us in early youth, undirected, and of its own accord.

I would not know how much a child's life is bound up in the words and hills and meadows around it, if I had not been jerked away from all these and thrown out into a country as bare as a piece of sheet iron.

All my stories have been written with material that was gathered—no, God save us! Not gathered but absorbed—before I was fifteen years old.

The ideas for all my novels have come from things that happened around Red Cloud when I was a child.

A pioneer should have imagination, should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves.

#### RELATIONSHIP

I wondered if the life that was right for one was ever right for two!

No one can build his security upon the nobleness of another person.

The heart of another is a dark forest, always, no matter how close it has been to one's own.

It does not matter much whom we live with in this world, but it matters a great deal whom we dream of.

One realizes that human relationships are the tragic necessity of human life; that they can never be wholly satisfactory, that every ego is half the time greedily seeking them, and half the time pulling away from them.

#### COUNTRY AND PEOPLE

I care a lot more about the country and the people than I care about my own way of writing or anybody else's way of writing.

What I always want to do is to make the writing count for less and less and the people for more. I am trying to cut out all analysis, observation, description, even the picture-making quality, in order to make things and people tell their own story simply by juxtaposition, without any persuasion or explanation on my part.... Mere cleverness must go. I'd like the writing to be so lost in the object that it doesn't exist for the reader.

I have never found any intellectual excitement more intense than I used to feel when I spent a morning with one of these pioneer women at her baking or butter-making. I used to ride home in the most unreasonable state of excitement. I always felt as if they told me so much more than they said—as if I had actually got inside another person's skin.... Their stories used to go round and round in my head at night. This was, with me, the initial impulse.

The farmer's wife who raises a large family and cooks for them and makes their clothes and keeps house and on the side runs a truck garden and a chicken farm and a canning establishment, and thoroughly enjoys doing it all, and doing it well, contributes more to art than all the culture clubs.

#### FRIENDS

My art is more important than my friend.

Only solitary men know the full joys of friendship. Others have their family; but to a solitary and an exile his friends are everything.

It is all very well to tell us to forgive our enemies; our enemies can never hurt us very much. But oh, what about forgiving our friends?

The fewer friends he has the better; every friend means one more manager. Friends demand weekly dividends on the interest they invest in one. When a man has nothing on earth but a purpose people might hold their tongues and leave him alone with it. Leave him to fail alone with it if God shall put upon him the chagrin of failure, to succeed alone with it if God reserved for him that fullness of joy. He cares only for that purpose.

#### FRONTIER PAST

The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman.

There was nothing but land; not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made.

When the first courageous settlers came straggling out through the waste with their oxen and covered wagons, they found open plateau, covered with long, red, shaggy grass. The prairie was green only where it had been burned off in the spring by the new settlers or by the Indians...

#### OLD NEBRASKA

I happen to be interested in the Scandinavian and Bohemian pioneers of Nebraska, because I lived among them when I was a child. When I was eight years old, my father moved from the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia to that Western country. My grandfather and grandmother had moved to Nebraska eight years before we left Virginia; they were among the real pioneers.

I shall never forget my introduction to it. We drove out from Red Cloud to my grandfather's homestead one day in April. I was sitting on the hay in the bottom of a Studebaker wagon, holding on to the side of the wagon box to steady myself—the roads were mostly faint trails over the bunch grass in those days. The land was open range and there was almost no fencing. As we drove further and further out into the country, I felt a good deal as if we had come to the end of everything—it was kind of erasure of personality.

My grandfather's homestead was about eighteen miles from Red Cloud—a little town on the Burlington, named after the old Indian chief who used to come hunting in that country, and who buried his daughter on the top of one of the river bluffs south of the town. Her grace had been looted for her rich furs and beadwork long before my family went West, but we children used to find arrowheads there and some of the bones of her pony that had been strangled above her grave.

We had very few American neighbors—they were mostly Swedes and Danes, Norwegians and Bohemians. I liked them from the first and they made up for what I missed in the country. I particularly liked the old women, they understood my homesickness and were kind to me.

#### CURRENT NEBRASKA

The whole State is a farm.

In this time of prosperity any farmer boy who wishes to study at the State University can do so.... Too much prosperity, too many moving-picture shows, too much gaudy fiction have colored the taste and manners of so many of these Nebraskans of the future. There, as elsewhere, one finds the frenzy to be showy; farmer boys who wish to be spenders before they are earners, girls who try to look like the heroines of the cinema screen; a coming generation which tries to cheat its aesthetic sense by buying things instead of making anything. There is even danger that that fine institution, the University of Nebraska, may become a gigantic trade school.

The wave of generous idealism, of noble seriousness, which swept over the State of Nebraska in 1917 and 1918, demonstrated how fluid and flexible is any living, growing, expanding society. If such "conversions"

do not last, they at least show of what men and women are capable. Surely the materialism and showy extravagance of this hour are a passing phase!

Winter lies too long in country towns; hangs on until it is stale and shabby, old and sullen.

#### LITERARY SITUATION

In those days, no one seemed so wonderful as Henry James; for me, he was the perfect writer.

Generally speaking, the older and more established the civilization, the better a subject it is for art. In an old community there has been time for associations to gather and for interesting types to develop.

The rage for newness and conventionality is one of the things which I deplore in the present-day Nebraska. The second is the prevalence of a superficial culture.

As everyone knows, Nebraska is distinctly declass  as a literary background; its very name throws the delicately attuned critic into a clammy shiver of embarrassment. Kansas is almost as unpromising. Colorado, on the contrary, is considered quite possible. Wyoming really has some class, of its own kind, like well-cut riding breeches. But a New York critic voiced a very general opinion when he said: "I simply don't care a damn what happens in Nebraska, no matter who writes about it."

The "novel of the soil" had not then come into fashion in this country. The drawing-room was considered the proper setting for a novel, and the only characters worth reading about were smart people or clever people. 'O. Henry' had made the short story go into the world of the cheap boarding-house and the shop-girl and the truck-driver. But Henry James and Mrs. Wharton were our most interesting novelists, and most of the younger writers followed their manner, without having their qualifications.

#### MYTHIC SYMBOL

There were no clouds, the sun was going down in a limpid, gold-washed sky. Just as the lower edge of the red disk rested on the high fields against the horizon, a great black figure suddenly appeared on the face of the sun. We sprang to our feet, straining our eyes toward it. In a moment we realized what it was. On some upland farm, a plough has been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disk, the handles, the tongue, the share--black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun.

#### NATURE

Civilization is a very large boast.

That love of great spaces, of rolling open country like the sea—it's the grand passion of my life.

I like trees because they seem more resigned to the way they have to live than other things do. I feel as if this tree knows everything I ever think of when I sit here.

There is one book that I would rather have produced than all my novels. That is the Clemens botany dealing with the wild flowers of the west.

#### BRUTE INSTINCTS

It makes one exceedingly weary to hear people object to football because it is brutal. Of course it is brutal. So is Homer brutal, and Tolstoi; that is, they all alike appeal to the crude savage instincts of men. We have not outgrown all our old animal instincts yet, heaven grant we never shall! The moment that, as a nation, we lose brute force, or an admiration for brute force, from that moment poetry and art are forever dead among us, and we will have nothing but grammar and mathematics left. The only way poetry can ever reach one is through one's brute instincts.

## HUMAN NATURE

Men travel faster now, but I do not know if they go to better things.

Whole nations have died from spiritual famine as well as from a famine of corn.

The dead might as well try to speak to the living as the old to the young.

## SOCIETY

If all men were happy, refined, cultivated, then society would be a monotonous plane—there would be no mountains.

The public is stupid. It can be tricked and duped and made to dance like a bear by a beautiful woman. But when it turns it is pitiless and it spares not... Yes, in the long run, society is just. It does not mean to be or try to be, but somehow in the course of events, in the very nature of things, it stumbles upon justice.

There are some things you learn best in calm, and some in storm.

When kindness has left people, even for a few moments, we become afraid of them as if their reason had left them. When it has left a place where we have always found it, it is like shipwreck; we drop from security into something malevolent and bottomless.

Some day, perhaps, when our civilization has grown too utterly complex, when our introspection cuts off all action, when our forms have killed all ambition, when sincerity and simplicity have utterly gone from us and we are only a bundle of nerves, then the savage strength of the Slav or the Bushmen will come upon us and will burn our psychologies and carry us away into captivity and make us dress the vines and plow the earth and teach us that after all nature is best. God's scheme is so big, his resources so many.

Humanity is always rushing to its own destruction, but it never quite accomplishes it.

## TRUTH

The scientist who sees the world as a collection of atoms and forces, the political economist who sees it as a set of powers and federations, sees falsely. They see facts, not truths. The only things which are really truths are those which in some degree affect all men.... The ultimate truths are never seen through the reason, but through the imagination.

The stupid believe that to be truthful is easy; only the artist, the great artist, knows how difficult it is.

Artistic growth is, more than it is anything else, a refining of the sense of truthfulness.

## REFORMERS

The planets continue to travel in their appointed courses without assistance, and so would human society if reformers would not attempt to hurry nature and to aid providence. For every ill in human life God made a cure, and it would all work out right some day if the reformer will only let it.

When I first lived in New York and was working on the editorial staff of a magazine, I became disillusioned about social workers and reformers. So many of them, when they brought in an article on fire-trap tenements or sweat-shop labor, apologetically explained that they were making these investigations "to collect material for fiction." I couldn't believe that any honest welfare worker, or any honest novelist, went to work in this way.

When the world is in a bad way, we are told, it is the business of the composer and the poet to devote himself to propaganda and fan the flames of indignation. But the world has a habit of being in a bad way from time to time, and art has never contributed anything to help matters—except escape.

The literary radicals...made a career of destroying the past. The only new thing they offered us was contempt for the old. Then began the flood of belittling biography which has poured over us ever since. We were told how shallow had been all the great philosophers, what educated dullards were Goethe, Rousseau, Spinoza, Pascal. Shakespeare and Dante were easily disposed of; the one because he was somebody else, the other because he was a cryptogram and did not at all mean to say what the greatest lines in the Italian language make him say. [compare Postmodernism]

An artist should have no moral purpose in mind other than just his art. His mission is not to clean the Augean stables; he had better join the Salvation Army if he wants to do that.

#### WOMEN WRITERS

Sometimes I wonder why God ever trusts talent in the hands of women, they usually make such an infernal mess of it. I think He must do it as a sort of ghastly joke.... I have not much faith in women in fiction. They have a sort of sex consciousness that is abominable. They are so limited to one string and they lie so about that. They are so few, the ones who really did anything worth while; there were the great Georges, George Eliot and George Sand, and they were anything but women, and there was Miss Bronte who kept her sentimentality under control, and there was Jane Austen who certainly had more common sense than any of them and was in some respects the greatest of them all. Women are so horribly subjective and they have such scorn for the healthy commonplace. When a woman writes a story of adventure, a stout sea tale, a manly battle yarn, anything without wine, women and love, then I will begin to hope for something great from them, not before.

The feminine mind has a hankering for hobbies and missions, consequently there have been but two real creators among women authors, George Sand and George Eliot.

#### WOMEN WITH CAREERS

It cannot help but be good. It at least keeps the woman interested in something real. As for the choice between a woman's home and her career, is there any reason why she cannot have both? In France the business is regarded as a family affair.... Yet the French women are famous housekeepers and their children do not suffer for lack of care.

#### RELIGION

The art of Italy flowered when the painters were confined almost entirely to religious subjects.

The soul cannot be humbled by fasts and prayer; it must be broken by mortal sin to experience forgiveness of sin and rise to a state of grace. Otherwise, religion is nothing but dead logic.

The miracles of the church seem to me to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always.

Religion and art spring from the same root and are close kin. Economics and art are strangers. [These lines were borrowed from Hawthorne]

#### PLATONISM

These "forms" were the subject of much banter between them.

What change would have come in his blue eye, in his fine long hand with the backspringing thumb, which had never handled things that were not the symbols of ideas? [Tom Outland]

## ART

Amusement is one thing, enjoyment of art is another.

Every great work of art should teach, but never preach.

Art is not thought or emotion, but expression.... To keep an idea living, intact, tinged with all its original feeling, its original mood, preserving in it all the ecstasy which attended its birth, to keep it so all the way from the brain to the hand and transfer it on paper a living thing with color, odor, sound, life all in it, that is what art means.... And that is the voyage perilous, and between those two ports more has been lost than all the yawning caverns of the sea have ever swallowed.

Art, it seems to me, should simplify. That, indeed, is very nearly the whole of the higher artistic process; finding what conventions of form and what detail one can do without and yet preserve the spirit of the whole—so that all that one has suppressed and cut away is there to the reader's consciousness as much as if it were in type on the page. [iceberg principle]

What was any art but a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining elusive element which is life itself—life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose.

## THE ARTIST

An artist is a child always, but a child is not always an artist.

Every artist makes himself born. It is very much harder than the other time, and longer.

The revolt against individualism naturally calls artists severely to account, because the artist is of all men the most individual: those who were not have been long forgotten.

No artist does a thing because it is noble or good; he does it because he can do it well, because his mind is so made that perfection in something or other is his chiefest need.

An author must live, live deeply and richly and generously, live not only his own life, but all lives. He must have experiences that cannot be got out of a classical dictionary or even in polite society. He must know the world a good deal as God knows it, in all the pitiable depravity of its evil, in all the measureless sublimity of its good.

## ARTISTIC SALVATION

It takes a whole long life not only of faith but of works to give an artist salvation and immortality among his kind.

## SAPPHO

There is one woman poet whom all the world calls great, though of her work there remains only a few disconnected fragments and that one wonderful hymn to Aphrodite. Small things upon which to rest so great a fame, but they tell so much. If of all the lost richness we could have one master restored to us, one of all the philosophers and poets, the choice of the world would be for the lost nine books of Sappho. Those broken fragments have burned themselves into the consciousness of the world like fire. All great poets have wondered at them, all inferior poets have imitated them. Twenty centuries have not cooled the passion in them.... She was probably not a student of prosody, yet she invented the most wonderfully emotional meter in literature, the sapphic meter with its three full, resonant lines, and then that short, sharp one that comes in like a gasp when feeling flows too swift for speech.

## LITERATURE

In reading over a package of letters from Sarah Orne Jewett, I find this observation: "The thing that teases the mind over and over for years, and at last gets itself put down rightly on paper--whether little or great, it belongs to Literature."

There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before.

Every great story...must leave in the mind of the sensitive reader an intangible residuum of pleasure; a cadence, a quality of voice that is exclusively the writer's own, individual, unique.

I think many story writers try to multiply their ideas instead of trying to simplify them; that is, they often try to make a story out of every idea they have, to get returns on every situation that suggests itself. And, as a result, their work is entertaining, journalistic and thin.

In my course of reading thousands of stories, I was strengthened in the conclusion that I had come to before; that nothing was really worth while that did not cut pretty deep, and that the main thing always was to be honest.

## SHORT STORY & NOVEL

A short story is merely a mood, an impression. The chances are that it will have genuineness and continuity like any burst of feeling. But a novel requires not one flash of understanding, but a clear, steady flame and oil in one's flask beside. Not a mood, but a continuous flow of feeling and thought and a vast knowledge of technique and of the artistic construction of the whole. Many a man can fashion an arch or design a spire or carve a gargoyle, but to build a cathedral is quite another matter.

## POE

After helping build monuments to Shelley, Keats and Carlyle we have at last remembered this man, the greatest of our poets and the most unhappy.... We lament our dearth of great prose. With the exception of Henry James and Hawthorne, Poe is our only master of pure prose. We lament our dearth of poets. With the exception of Lowell, Poe is our only great poet. Poe found short story writing a bungling makeshift. He left it a perfect art. He wrote the first perfect short stories in the English language.

## AMERICAN LITERATURE

The Transcendentalists were good conversationalists, that in fact was their principal accomplishment.

If I were asked to name three American books which have the possibility of a long, long life, I would say at once: *The Scarlet Letter*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Country of the Pointed Firs*.

## STYLE

It is this very personal quality of perception, a vivid and intensely personal experience of life, which make a "style"; Mark Twain had it, at his best, and Hawthorne. But among fifty thousand books you will find very few writers who ever achieved a style at all. The distinctive thing about Miss Jewett is that she had an individual voice...

## WALT WHITMAN

Speaking of monuments reminds one that there is more talk about a monument to Walt Whitman.... If ever there was a poet who had no literary ethics at all beyond those of nature, it was he. He was neither good nor bad, any more than are the animals he continually admired and envied. He was a poet without an exclusive sense of the poetic, a man without the finer discriminations, enjoying everything with the unreasoning enthusiasm of a boy. He was the poet of the dung hill as well as of the mountains, which is admirable in theory but excruciating in verse.



*Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852)

All *Uncle Tom's Cabin* companies are bad, this one being one of the worst. The companies who play the immortal production are usually made up of mongrel nondescript actors, a very sleepy and sometimes very pretty little girl, and a few hungry-looking curs that have become stage-struck and have left the ordinary walks of life, cultivated a tragic howl and seek for glory on the histrionic boards.... *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is old, older than almost any other play, because it never had enough vitality in it to keep it young. In point of construction it is about the poorest melodrama on the American stage, and that is saying a good deal. From a literary point of view the play is like the book, exaggerated, overdrawn, abounding in facts but lacking in truth. The work of a woman who sat up under cold skies of the north and tried to write [about] one of the warmest, richest and most highly-colored civilizations the world has ever known; a Puritan blue-stocking who tried to blend the savage blood of the jungle and the romance of Creole civilization.

MARK TWAIN AND SARAH ORNE JEWETT

My own favorite American authors? Well, I've never changed in that respect much since I was a girl at school. There were great ones I liked best then and still like—Mark Twain, Henry James and Sarah Orne Jewett.

To the memory of Sarah Orne Jewett in whose beautiful and delicate work there is the perfection that endures. [Dedication to *O Pioneers!*]

HENRY JAMES AND EDITH WHARTON

Henry James and Mrs. Wharton were our most interesting novelists, and most of the younger writers followed their manner, without having their qualifications.

I can think of but one English-speaking author who is really keeping his self-respect and sticking for perfection. Of course I refer to that mighty master of language and keen student of human actions and motives, Henry James.... I wish James would write about modern society, about "degeneracy" and the new woman and all the rest of it....he would say such awfully clever things about it, and turn on so many side-lights. And then his sentences! If his character novels were all wrong one could read him forever for the mere beauty of his sentences....that masterly prose that is as correct, as classical, as calm and as subtle as the music of Mozart.

STEPHEN CRANE

[Stephen] Crane was one of the first post-impressionists...he began it before the French painters began it, or at least as early as the first of them. He simply knew from the beginning how to handle detail. He estimated it at its true worth—made it serve his purpose and felt no further responsibility about it. I doubt whether he ever spent a laborious half-hour in doing his duty by detail—in enumerating, like an honest, grubby auctioneer. If he saw one thing that engaged him in a room, he mentioned it. If he saw one thing in a landscape that thrilled him, he put it on paper, but he never tried to make a faithful report of everything else within his field of vision, as if he were a conscientious salesman making out his expense-account....

KATE CHOPIN

A creole "Bovary" is this little novel of Miss Chopin's. Not that the heroine is a creole exactly, or that Miss Chopin is a Flaubert—save the mark!—but the theme is similar to that which occupied Flaubert. There was, indeed, no need that second *Madame Bovary* should be written, but an author's choice of themes is frequently as inexplicable as his choice of a wife. It is governed by some innate temperamental bias that cannot be diagrammed. This is particularly so in women who write, and I shall not attempt to say why Miss Chopin has devoted so exquisite and sensitive, well-governed a style to so trite and sordid a theme. She writes much better than it is ever given to most people to write, and hers is a genuinely literary style; of no great elegance or solidity; but light, flexible, subtle and capable of producing telling effects directly and simply. The story she has to tell in the present instance is new neither in matter nor treatment....

“Edna Pontellier” and “Emma Bovary” are studies in the same feminine type; one a finished and complete portrayal, the other a hasty sketch, but the theme is essentially the same. Both women belong to a class, not large, but forever clamoring in our ears, that demands more romance out of life than God put into it. Mr. G. Bernard Shaw would say that they are the victims of the over-idealization of love.... “Edna Pontellier,” fanciful and romantic to the last, chose the sea on a summer night and went down with the sound of her first lover’s spurs in her ears, and the scent of pinks about her. And next time I hope Miss Chopin will devote that flexible, iridescent style of hers to a better cause.

## EUROPEAN LITERATURE

In spite of its unquestionable merit, of its undeniable power, this book is only a novel of the butcher shop with a fish wife for a heroine. And once again Zola has only written a book full of repulsive odors, about another kind of unhappiness. Of all men under the skies, the most pitiful is this Zola, the miserable. One could almost sell his soul to know for one minute the dreams that Shakespeare or that Dante saw, but who for all his fortune and for all his fame would be Zola?... All this massive work of Zola’s is like one of those terrible granite bulls unearthed from Nineveh, it lacks the impress of a human soul.

Paul Verlaine died in Paris. From the Café du Soleil there is missed a ragged, dirty old man with high cheek bones and slanting eyes, who used to sit there with his glass of absinthe and read the newspaper, jotting down fragments of poetry upon the margin.... Imagine a satyr converted to the most ecstatic form of ascetic Christianity and there you have Verlaine, the grossest of sensualists, the most exalted of the devotional mystics.

We will have no more such plays as *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, no more such stories as *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*. We can do without them. They were full of insanity. It is a peculiar fact that the aesthetic school which has from the beginning set out to seek what was most beautiful has ended by finding what was most grotesque, misshapen, chaos and confusion. A man [Oscar Wilde] who founds his art upon a lie lives a lie, it matters not what form his sins may take.

When Count Tolstoi lived in the world and was, as he assures us, a wicked man, he wrote one of the greatest novels of his country. Now that he lives like a recluse and makes pea soup for Russian peasants he writes some of the most wearisome stuff that is published.

I admire Thomas Hardy; I admire the lofty conception of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, the finished execution of *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, the beautiful simplicity of *Far from the Madding Crowd*. But for *Hearts Insurgent* [*Jude the Obscure*] I have no forgiveness.

## REALISM

I have never drawn but one portrait of an actual person.... All my other characters are drawn from life, but they are all composites of three or four persons.

There is a popular superstition that “realism” asserts itself in the cataloguing of a great number of material objects, in explaining mechanical processes, the methods of operating manufactories and trades, and in minutely and unsparingly describing physical sensations [Naturalism]. But is not realism, more than it is anything else, an attitude of mind on the part of the writer toward his material, a vague indication of the sympathy and candor with which he accepts, rather than chooses, his theme?

Word artists have had their day of greatness and are rapidly on the decline. We want men who can paint with emotion, not with words. We haven’t time for pastels in prose and still life; we want people.

An author is not an artist until he can create characters that we love not for their goodness or their character or their “cause,” but for themselves.... If one cannot make great men and make them real men, as Thackeray and Balzac did, then it is better to make very common little men in sack coats as Howells does. The main requisite is that they live.

## EUROPEAN REALISM

We have stood the awfulness of French realism very patiently, but we must draw a line at the Russian. French anguish isn't so bad after all, it's such a self-satisfied, intentional, stagey kind of anguish, while the anguish of the northern people is such a dumb, brutal, helpless sort of suffering. When the French lover commits suicide he does it artistically and dramatically with a fan in his pocket, a neat epigram on his lips and a rose in his button-hole. The northern man does it in an awful disgusting manner like Ibsen's Lovborg. When Frenchmen go insane it is always a beautiful, fanciful insanity...

## LOCAL COLOR

Local color, as Kipling once remarked, is a dangerous weapon. It is the element of women, they seldom write about anything else. The greatest artists, like Turgenieff, have always used it with an almost niggardly care.

## DECADENT ROMANTICISM

Word artists have had their day of greatness and are rapidly on the decline. We want men who can paint with emotion, not with words. We haven't time for pastels in prose and still life; we want people.

One likes to read about sound, active, healthy men of the world sometimes, and not always about a collection of melancholy freaks.

## VICTORIANISM

The curse of every school and phase of modern art is the guild of drawing-room critics; critics who sneer at the great and powerful, and adore the clever and the dainty. They refuse to read anything more stimulating than Howells' parlor farces...

It is no new phase of criticism for people with a poverty of emotion and imagination to say that everything more pronounced is overdrawn and unnatural. Whatever they cannot feel, they claim is beyond the range of human feeling; and whatever they have not experienced, they claim is beyond the limit of human experience. These critics have had a wonderful effect upon the authors and playwrights of the nineteenth century.

## MODERNISM

There are hopeful signs that some of the younger writers are trying to break away from mere verisimilitude [Realism], and, following the development of modern painting [Expressionism], to interpret imaginatively the material and social investiture of their characters; to present their scene by suggestion rather than by enumeration [as in Naturalism]. The higher processes of art are all processes of simplification. [Modernist iceberg principle & objective correlative]

The artist spends a lifetime in loving the things that haunt him...in trying to get these conceptions down on paper exactly as they are to him and not in conventional poses supposed to reveal their character; trying this method and that, as a painter tries different lightings and different attitudes with his subject to catch the one that presents it more suggestively than any other. And at the end of a lifetime he emerges with much that is more or less happy experimenting, and comparatively little that is the very flower of himself and of his genius.

## WRITING

Let your fiction grow out of the land beneath your feet.

Give the people a new word and they think they have a new fact.

Most of the basic material a writer works with is acquired before the age of fifteen.

The talent for writing is largely the talent for living, and is utterly independent of knowledge.

Desire is creation, is the magical element in that process. If there were an instrument by which to measure desire, one could foretell achievement.

Then I had the good fortune to meet Sarah Orne Jewett, who had read all of my early stories and had very clear and definite opinions about them and about where my work fell short. She said, "Write it as it is, don't try to make it like this or that. You can't do it in anybody else's way—you will have to make a way of your own. If the way happens to be new, don't let that frighten you. Don't try to write the kind of short story that this or that magazine wants—write the truth, and let them take it or leave it."

#### INTUITION AND INTELLECT

The wisdom of intuition as opposed to that of intellect: With this to shape his course, a writer contrives and connives only as regards mechanical details, and questions of effective presentation, always debatable. About the essential matter of his story he cannot argue this way or that; he has seen it, has been enlightened about it in flashes that are as unreasoning, often as unreasonable, as life itself.

#### RANGE

To note an artist's limitations is but to define his talent. A reporter can write equally well about everything that is presented to his view, but a creative writer can do his best only with what lies within the range and character of his deepest sympathies.

#### IMPLICATIONS

Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named [compare iceberg principle], of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself.

#### ECONOMY

The novel, for a long while, has been over-furnished.

Too much detail is apt, like any other form of extravagance, to become slightly vulgar; and it quite destroys in a book a very satisfying element analogous to what painters call "composition."

A novel crowded with physical sensations is no less a catalogue than one crowded with furniture.... How wonderful it would be if we could throw all the furniture out of the window, and along with it, all the meaningless reiterations concerning physical sensations, all the tiresome old patterns; and leave the room as bare as the stage of a Greek theatre, or as that house into which the glory of Pentecost descended; leave the scene bare for the play of emotions, great and little—for the nursery tale, no less than the tragedy, is killed by tasteless amplitude.

#### HER WORKS

##### *Alexander's Bridge* (1912)

My first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, was very like what painters call a studio picture. It was the result of meeting some interesting people in London.... The impressions I tried to communicate on paper were genuine but they were very shallow.

In *Alexander's Bridge* I was still more preoccupied with trying to write well than with anything else. It takes a great deal of experience to become natural. A painter or writer must learn to distinguish what is his own from that which he admires.

*O Pioneers!* (1913)

I dedicated my novel *O Pioneers!* To Miss Jewett because I had talked over some of the characters in it with her one day at Manchester, and in this book I tried to tell the story of the people as truthfully and simply as if I were telling it to her by word of mouth.

*O Pioneers!* interested me tremendously, because it had to do with a kind of country I loved, because it was about old neighbors, once very dear, whom I had almost forgotten in the hurry and excitement of growing up and finding out what the world was like and trying to get on in it. But I did not in the least expect that other people would see anything in a slow-moving story, without "action," without "humour," without a "hero"; a story concerned entirely with heavy farming people, with cornfields and pasture lands and pig yards,—set in Nebraska, of all places!

*The Professor's House* (1925)

A work-room should be like an old shoe; no matter how shabby, it's better than a new one.

When I wrote *The Professor's House*, I wished to try two experiments in form. The first is the device often used by the early French and Spanish novelists; that of inserting the *Nouvelle* into the *Roman*.... But the experiment which interested me was something a little more vague, and was very much akin to the arrangement that followed in sonatas in which the academic sonata form was handled somewhat freely. Just before I began the book I had seen, in Paris, an exhibition of old and modern Dutch paintings. In many of them the scene presented was a living-room warmly furnished, or a kitchen full of food and coppers. But in most of the interiors, whether drawing-room or kitchen, there was a square window, open, through which one saw the masts of ships, or a stretch of grey sea. The feeling of the sea that one got through those square windows was remarkable, and gave me a sense of the fleets of Dutch ships that ply quietly on all the waters of the globe—to Java, etc.

In my book I try to make Professor St. Peter's house rather overcrowded and stuffy with new things; American proprieties, clothes, furs, petty ambitions, quivering jealousies—until one got rather stifled. Then I wanted to open the square window and let in the fresh air that blew off the Blue Mesa, and the fine disregard of trivialities which was in Tom Outland's face and in his behavior. The above concerned me as a writer only, but the Blue Mesa (the Mesa Verde) actually was discovered by a young cowpuncher in just this way. The great explorer Nordenskjold wrote a scientific book about this discovery, and I myself had the good fortune to hear the story of it from a very old man, brother of Dick Wetherell. Dick Wetherell as a young boy forded Mancos River and rode into the Mesa after lost cattle. I followed the real story very closely in Tom Outland's narrative.

*Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927)

I had all my life wanted to do something in the style of legend, which is absolutely the reverse of dramatic treatment....too much information often makes one pompous, and it's rather deadening.... In the main, I followed the life story of the two Bishops very much as it was, though I used many of my own experiences, and some of my father's....a novel, it seems to me, is merely a work of imagination in which a writer tries to present the experiences and emotions of a group of people by the light of his own.

PRESENT AGE

The world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts.

This is becoming such a terribly mechanical age that pretty soon we may have a little ticker that will keep correct count of our deeds done in the body and estimate the exact state of our souls and save St. Peter the trouble.

## DEATH

To fulfil the dreams of one's youth; that is the best that can happen to a man.

I shall not die of a cold. I shall die of having lived.

## EPITAPH

That is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. [from *My Antonia*]

