

## 142 QUOTATIONS



Henry James

(1843-1916)

Henry James remains important as the most influential original theorist and exemplar of Realism, the major tradition in American fiction. Once considered the greatest American novelist by most critics and other novelists, James was never appealing to the common reader and is even less so today because of his subject matter—upper class people usually in Europe—his slow pace, densely analytical perspective, detailing of psychological states, and complicated abstract prose style. He became more challenging to read as his style evolved. The best introduction to James is his only popular work, a scandal to American women, *Daisy Miller* (1878), followed by “The Beast in the Jungle” (1903), which dramatizes some of his most recurrent themes, elaborated in the novel he considered his best, *The Ambassadors* (1903). Today the most relevant and humorous of his novels is *The Bostonians* (1886), his satire of radical Feminism—which met with such disapproval in Boston that James was discouraged from setting any more fiction in America. There is a great variety of women characters in James, he found cultivated women fascinating, and his sensibility is more feminine than any major American male novelist since Hawthorne, who had a strong aesthetic influence upon him. Of the two traditions that grew from Realism, he criticized Naturalism and cultivated Impressionism, the tradition that later informed the aesthetics of Modernism. Droll and witty, James was most influential for his realistic “Method” of limiting perception in narration to the impressions of a central intelligence who usually expands in consciousness with implications all along that give the reader an opportunity to become aware ahead of the protagonist, generating ironies. The fiction of James rewards patience. His advice is “Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost.”

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, life, defining himself, idealistic teacher, unmarried, success, money, England, America, Civil War, human nature, values, manners, society, women, American women, New Woman, reformers, art, interest, objectivity, organic form, experimentalism, style, irony, solidity of specification, character, dramatization, comic muddlement, complications, closure, perfection, Realism, real and romantic, moral sense, sensibility, experience, principles, Impressionism, Expressionism, gentility, criticism, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Poe, Fuller, Emerson, drama, *Live!*, death:

## YOUTH

I think I don't regret a single "excess" of my responsive youth—I only regret, in my chilled age, certain occasions and possibilities I didn't embrace.

## LIFE

Life is a predicament which precedes death.

Things are always different than what they might be. If you wait for them to change, you will never do anything.

Three things in human life are important: the first is to be kind; the second is to be kind; the third is to be kind.

Life is, in fact, a battle. Evil is insolent and strong; beauty enchanting, but rare; goodness very apt to be weak; folly very apt to be defiant; wickedness to carry the day; imbeciles to be in great places, people of sense in small, and mankind generally unhappy. But the world as it stands is no narrow illusion, no phantasm, no evil dream of the night; we must wake up to it, forever and ever, and we can neither forget it nor deny it nor dispense with it.

## DEFINING HIMSELF

I've always been interested in people, but I've never liked them.

I don't want everyone to like me; I should think less of myself if some people did.

He is outside of everything, and alien everywhere. He is an aesthetic solitary.

I intend to judge things for myself; to judge wrongly, I think, is more honorable than not to judge at all.

True happiness, we are told, consists in getting out of one's self; but the point is not only to get out—you must stay out; and to stay out you must have some absorbing errand.

When I'm really at work, I'm happy, I feel strong, I see many opportunities ahead. It is the only thing that makes life endurable.... I shall have been a failure unless I do something *great*.

Try everything, do everything, render everything—be an artist, be distinguished to the last.

## IDEALISTIC TEACHER

To believe in a child is to believe in the future. Through their aspirations they will save the world. With their combined knowledge the turbulent seas of hate and injustice will be calmed. They will champion the causes of life's underdogs, forging a society without class discrimination. They will supply humanity with music and beauty as it has never known. They will endure. Towards these ends I pledge my life's work. I will supply the children with tools and knowledge to overcome the obstacles... I shall teach.

## UNMARRIED

I am unlikely ever to marry... One's attitude toward marriage is...the most characteristic part doubtless of one's general attitude towards life... If I were to marry I should be guilty in my own eyes of inconsistency—I should pretend to think quite a little better of life than I really do.

## SUCCESS

Whatever life you lead you must put your soul in it—to make any sort of success in it; and from the moment you do that it ceases to be romance, I assure you: it becomes grim reality!

## MONEY

Money's a horrid thing to follow, but a charming thing to meet.

## ENGLAND

However British you may be, I am more British still.

It takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature.

If it is good to have one foot in England, it is still better, or at least as good, to have the other out of it.

## AMERICA

An American, to excel, has just ten times as much to learn as a European!

To write well and worthily of American things one needs even more than elsewhere to be a master.

It's a complex fate, being an American, and one of the responsibilities it entails is fighting against a superstitious valuation of Europe.

One might enumerate the items of high civilization, as it exists in other countries, which are absent from the texture of American life, until it should become a wonder to know what was left.

It is, I think, an indisputable fact that Americans are, as Americans, the most self-conscious people in the world, and the most addicted to the belief that the other nations of the earth are in a conspiracy to under value them.

History, as yet, has left in the United States but so thin and impalpable a deposit that we very soon touch the hard substratum of nature; and nature herself, in the western world, has the peculiarity of seeming rather crude and immature.

If I were to live my life over again, I would be an American. I would steep myself in America, I would know no other land.

## CIVIL WAR

The brightness of the outlook at home was not made greater by the explosion of the Civil War in the spring of 1861.... The whole affair was a bitter disappointment...and a fatal blow to that happy faith in the uninterruptedness of American prosperity which I have spoken of as the religion of the old-fashioned American in general, and the old-fashioned Democrat in particular.

## HUMAN NATURE

Deep experience is never peaceful.

Never say you know the last word about any human heart.

Cats and monkeys; monkeys and cats; all human nature is there.

Sorrow comes in great waves...but rolls over us, and though it may almost smother us, it leaves us. And we know that if it is strong, we are stronger, inasmuch as it passes and we remain.

## VALUES

Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost.

You can let your conscience alone if you're nice to the second housemaid.

I call people rich when they're able to meet the requirements of their imagination.

Obstacles are those frightening things you see when you take your eyes off your goal.

#### MANNERS

[Manners are] the outward and visible sign of an inward spiritual grace.

An Englishman's never so natural as when he's holding his tongue.

You were ground in the very mill of the conventional.

Though there are some disagreeable things in Venice there is nothing so disagreeable as the visitors.

#### SOCIETY

Young men of this class never do anything for themselves that they can get other people to do for them, and it is the infatuation, the devotion, the superstition of others that keeps them going. These others in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred are women.

The superiority of one man's opinion over another's is never so great as when the opinion is about a woman.

#### WOMEN

She is written in a foreign tongue.

She feels in italics and thinks in CAPITALS.

A man who pretends to understand women is bad manners. For him to really understand them is bad morals.

Her reputation for reading a great deal hung about her like the cloudy envelope of a goddess in an epic.

She had an infinite hope that she would never do anything wrong. She had resented so strongly, after discovering them, her mere errors of feeling.

Every now and then she found out she was wrong, and then she treated herself to a week of passionate humility.

Our young lady was vexed at not hearing that she had lived for a good many years in Europe, as this would have made it easy to classify her as one of the corrupt.

Her nature had for her own imagination a certain garden-like quality, a suggestion of perfume and murmuring bows, of shady bowers and of lengthening vistas, which made her feel that introspection was, after all, an exercise in the open air, and that a visit to the recesses of one's mind was harmless when one returned from it with a lapful of roses.

There are women who are unmarried by accident, and others who are unmarried by option; but Olive Chancellor was unmarried by every implication of her being. She was a spinster as Shelley was a lyric poet, or as the month of August is sultry.

"Dear Miss Tarrant, what is most agreeable to women is to be agreeable to men!"

"The position of women is to make fools of men." [Basil Ransom]

## AMERICAN WOMEN

American women—the pretty ones, and this gave a largeness to the axiom—were at once the most exacting in the world and the least endowed with a sense of indebtedness.

“I don’t think I want to know what you mean,” the girl presently said. “I don’t think I should like it.”

## NEW WOMAN

“I’ve never allowed a gentleman to dictate to me or to interfere with anything I do.” [Daisy Miller]

She struck him afresh, in all this, as an extraordinary mixture of innocence and crudity.

Chivalry was forbearance and generosity with regard to the weak; and there was nothing weak about Miss Olive, she was a fighting woman, and she would fight him to the death, giving him not an inch of odds.

The real offense, as she ultimately perceived, was her having a mind of her own at all. Her mind was to be his—attached to his own like a small garden plot to a deer park.

The great advantage of being a literary woman was that you could go everywhere and do everything.

She had an unequalled gift, usually pen in hand, of squeezing big mistakes into opportunities.

The whole generation is womanized; the masculine tone is passing out of the world; it’s a feminine, a nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age, an age of hollow phrases and false delicacy and exaggerated solitudes and coddled sensibilities, which, if we don’t soon look out, will usher in the reign of mediocrity, of the feeblest and flattest and the most pretentious that has ever been.

“Men and women are all the same to me,” [Miss] Doctor Prance remarked. “I don’t see any difference.”

“You ladies had better look out, or you’ll freeze together.”

## REFORMERS

He, too, had a private vision of reform, but the first principle of it was to reform the reformers.

“I thought what she wanted was simply a different inequality—simply to turn out the men altogether.”

“I’ll tell you what is the matter with you—you don’t dislike men as a class.”

“Do you really take the ground that your sex has been without influence? Influence? Why, you have led us all by the nose to where we are now! Wherever we are, it’s all you.” [Basil Ransom]

If the influence of women in the past accounted for every act of virtue that men had happened to achieve, it only made the matter balance properly that the influence of men should explain the casual irregularities of the other sex.

She considered men in general as so much in the debt of the opposite sex that any individual woman had an unlimited credit with them; she could not possibly overdraw the general feminine account.

She was a little old lady, with an enormous head; that was the first thing Ransom noticed—the vast, fair, protuberant, candid, ungarnished brow, surmounting a pair of weak, kind, tired-looking eyes, and ineffectually balanced in the rear by a cap which had the air of falling backward, and which Miss Birdseye suddenly felt for while she talked, with unsuccessful irrelevant movements.

When Miss Birdseye approached, it transfigured her familiar, her comical shape and made the poor little humanitarian hack seem already a martyr. [Miss Birdseye is thought to have been modeled on the radical feminist Elizabeth Peabody, the sister-in-law of Nathaniel Hawthorne.]

She was in love, even in those days, only with causes, and she languished only for emancipations.

Mrs. Luna declared that if she must be trampled upon—and very likely it was her fate!—she would rather be trampled upon by men than by women, and that if Olive and her friends should get possession of the government they would be worse despots than those who were celebrated in history.

#### ART

In art economy is always beauty.

The province of art is all life; all feeling, all observation, all vision.

Art derives a considerable part of its beneficial exercise from flying in the face of presumptions.

It is art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance...and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process.

We work in the dark—we do what we can—we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art.

Life being all inclusion and confusion, and art being all discrimination and selection, the latter, in search of the hard latent value with which it alone is concerned, sniffs round the mass as instinctively and unerringly as a dog suspicious of some buried bone.

#### INTEREST

The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel, without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting.

I hold any writer sufficiently justified who is himself in love with his theme.

#### OBJECTIVITY

Certain accomplished novelists have a habit of giving themselves away which must often bring tears to the eyes of people who take their fiction seriously. I was lately struck, in reading over many pages of Anthony Trollope, with his want of discretion in this particular. In a digression, a parenthesis or an aside, he concedes to the reader that he and this trusting friend are only “making believe.” He admits that the events he narrates have not really happened, and that he can give his narrative any turn the reader may like best. Such a betrayal of a sacred office seems to me, I confess, a terrible crime...

#### ORGANIC FORM

A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts.

#### EXPERIMENTALISM

The advantage, the luxury, as well as the torment and responsibility of the novelist, is that there is no limit to what he may attempt as an executant—no limit to his possible experiments, efforts, discoveries, successes.

#### STYLE

I'm glad you like adverbs—I adore them; they are the only qualifications I really much respect.

## IRONY

Don't underestimate the value of irony—it is extremely valuable.

## SOLIDITY OF SPECIFICATION

One can speak from one's own taste, and I may therefore venture to say that the air of reality (*solidity of specification*) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel—the merit on which all its other merits...helplessly and submissively depend. If it be not there they are all as nothing, and if these be there, they owe their effect to the success with which the author has produced the *illusion of life*. [italics added]

## CHARACTER

What is a picture or a novel that is not of character?

What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?

There are few things more exciting to me...than a psychological reason.

## DRAMATIZATION

The ever importunate murmur, "Dramatize it, dramatize it!"

## COMIC MUDDLEMENT

The effort really to see and really to represent is no idle business in the face of the constant force that makes for muddlement. The great thing is indeed that the muddle state too is one of the very sharpest of the realities, that it also has color and form and character, has often in fact a broad and rich comicality.

## COMPLICATIONS

I hate American simplicity. I glory in the piling up of complications of every sort. If I could pronounce the name James in any different or more elaborate way I should be in favor of doing it.

## CLOSURE

Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall *appear* to do so.

## PERFECTION

Remember that your first duty is to be as complete as possible—to make as perfect a work.

Excellence does not require perfection.

## REALISM

The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life.

Do not think too much about optimism and pessimism; try and catch the colour of life itself.

It goes without saying that you will not write a good novel unless you possess the sense of reality.

The only classification of the novel that I can understand is into that which has life and that which has it not.

## REAL AND ROMANTIC

The real represents to my perception the things we cannot possibly *not* know, sooner or later, in one way or another... The romantic stands, on the other hand, for the things that, with all the facilities in the world, all the wealth and all the courage and all the wit and all the adventure, we never *can* directly know; the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and our desire.

## MORAL SENSE

There is, I think, no more nutritive or suggestive truth...than that of the perfect dependence of the “moral” sense of a work of art on the amount of felt life concerned in producing it. The question comes back thus, obviously, to the kind and the degree of the artist’s prime sensibility, which is the soil out of which his subject springs.

## SENSIBILITY

In museums and palaces we are alternate radicals and conservatives.

There are two kinds of taste, the taste for emotions of surprise and the taste for emotions of recognition.

Summer afternoon—summer afternoon; to me those have always been the two most beautiful words in the English language.

There are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea.

## EXPERIENCE

We must know, as much as possible, in our beautiful art...what we are talking about—and the only way to know is to have lived and loved and cursed and floundered and enjoyed and suffered.

The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implications of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life in general so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it—this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience.

Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative—much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius—it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations.

## PRINCIPLES

That the novelist must write from his experience, that his “characters must be real and such as might be met with in actual life,” that “a young lady brought up in a quiet country village should avoid descriptions of garrison life,” and “a writer whose friends and personal experiences belong to the lower middle-class should carefully avoid introducing his characters into society”; that one should enter one’s notes in a common-place book; that one’s figures should be clear in outline; that making them clear by some trick of speech or of carriage is a bad method, and “describing them at length” is a worse one; that English Fiction should have a “conscious moral purpose,” that “it is almost impossible to estimate too highly the value of careful workmanship—that is, of style,” that “the most important point of all is the story,” that “the story is everything”: these are principles with most of which it is surely impossible not to sympathize.

## IMPRESSIONISM

If experience consists of impressions, it may be said that impressions *are* experience.

There was a splendid sky, all blue-black and silver—a sparkling wintry vault, where the stars were like a myriad points of ice. The air was silent and sharp, and the vague snow looked cruel.



He looked like the priest of a religion that was passing through the stage of miracles.

Mrs. Farrinder, at almost any time, had the air of being introduced by a few remarks.

#### EXPRESSIONISM

Olive, part of the time, sat dumbly shaking her conscience, like a watch that wouldn't go, to make it tell her some better reason why she shouldn't like him.

#### GENTILITY

Art is essentially selection, but it is a selection whose main care is to be typical, to be inclusive. For many people art means rose-coloured window-panes, and selection means picking a bouquet for Mrs. Grundy.

[Readers] will have been positively struck...with the moral timidity of the usual English novelist; with his (or with her) aversion to face the difficulties with which on every side the treatment of reality bristles.

No good novel will ever proceed from a superficial mind.

The time-honored bread sauce of the happy ending.

#### CRITICISM

Ideas are, in truth, force.

The practice of 'reviewing'...in general has nothing in common with the art of criticism.

To criticize is to appreciate, to appropriate, to take intellectual possession, to establish in fine a relation with the criticized thing and to make it one's own.

The effect, if not the prime office, of criticism is to make our absorption and our enjoyment of the things that feed the mind as aware of itself as possible, since that awareness quickens the mental demand, which thus in turn wanders further and further for pasture.

The critical sense is so far from frequent that it is absolutely rare, and the possession of the cluster of qualities that minister to it is one of the highest distinctions... In this light one sees the critic as the real helper of the artist, a torchbearing outrider, the interpreter, the brother.... Just in proportion as he is sentient and restless, just in proportion as he reacts and reciprocates and penetrates, is the critic a valuable instrument.

We must grant the artist his subject, his idea, his donnee: our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it.... If we pretend to respect the artist at all, we must allow him his freedom of choice, in the face, in particular cases, of innumerable presumptions that the choice will not fructify.

The great question as to a poet or a novelist is, How does he feel about life? What, in the last analysis, is his philosophy? When vigorous writers have reached maturity, we are at liberty to gather from their works some expression of a total view of the world they have been so actively observing. This is the most interesting thing their works offer us. Details are interesting in proportion as they contribute to make it clear.

It must be admitted that good novels are much compromised by bad ones, and that the field at large suffers discredit from overcrowding.

## THOREAU

Whatever question there might be of his [Thoreau's] talent, there can be none, I think, of his genius. It was a slim and crooked one, but it was eminently personal. He was unperfect, unfinished, inartistic; he was worse than provincial—he was parochial.

## HAWTHORNE

Hawthorne is the most valuable example of the American genius... This is the real charm of Hawthorne's writing—this purity and spontaneity and naturalness of fancy.... The old Puritan moral sense, the consciousness of sin and hell, of the fearful nature of our responsibilities and the savage character of our Task-master—these things had been lodged in the mind of a man of Fancy.... Hawthorne, in his metaphysical moods, is nothing if not allegorical, and allegory, to my sense, is quite one of the lighter exercises of the imagination.... Certainly, as a general thing, we are struck with the ingenuity and felicity of Hawthorne's analogies and correspondences; the idea appears to have made itself at home in them easily.... The fine thing in Hawthorne is that he cared for the deeper psychology...

## POE

[Poe] had the advantage of being a man of genius, and his intelligence was frequently great.... Poe's judgments are pretensions, spiteful, vulgar; but they contain a great deal of sense and discrimination as well, and here and there, sometimes at frequent intervals, we find a phrase of happy insight imbedded in a patch of the most fatuous pedantry.

## FULLER

There flourished at that time in Boston a very remarkable and interesting woman... Miss Margaret Fuller by name. This lady was the apostle of culture, of intellectual curiosity... I mention Margaret Fuller here because a glimpse of her state of mind—her vivacity of desire and poverty of knowledge—helps to define the situation [of culture in New England]... this brilliant, restless, and unhappy woman—this ardent New Englander, this impassioned Yankee, who occupied so large a place in the thoughts, the lives, the affections, of an intelligent and appreciative society, and yet left behind her nothing but the memory of a memory. Her function, her reputation, were singular, and not altogether reassuring; she was a talker, she was *the* talker, she was the genius of talk. She had a magnificent, though by no means an unmitigated, egotism; and in some of her utterances it is difficult to say whether pride or humility prevails... Some of her writing has extreme beauty, almost all of it has a real interest, but her value, her activity, her sway (I am not sure that one can say her charm), were personal and practical.

## EMERSON

The situation was summed up and transfigured in the admirable and exquisite Emerson. He expressed all that it contained, and a good deal more, doubtless, besides; he was the man of genius of the moment; he was the Transcendentalist *par excellence*.... There were faulty parts in the Emersonian philosophy; but the general tone was magnificent.

## DRAMA

The anomalous fact is that the theater, so called, can flourish in barbarism, but that any *drama* worth speaking of can develop but in the air of civilization.

The historian, essentially, wants more documents than he can really use; the dramatist only wants more liberties than he can really take.

## LIVE!

The upshot of all such reflections is that I have only to let myself go. So I have said to myself all my life—so I said to myself in the far-off days of my fermenting and passionate youth. Yet I have never fully done it. The taste of it—of the need of it—rolls over me at times with commanding force...

Live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It doesn't matter what you do in particular, so long as you have had your life. If you haven't had that, what have you had?

Feel, feel, I say—feel for all you're worth, and even if it half kills you, for that is the only way to live.

Be not afraid of life, believe that life is worth living and your belief will create the fact.

And remember this, that if you've been hated, you've also been loved.

It's time to start living the life you've imagined.

## DEATH

So here it is at last, the distinguished thing!

It's the beast in the jungle—and it's *sprung!*

