

## 75 QUOTATIONS



### Wallace Stevens

(1879-1955)

Wallace Stevens is one of the three major American poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with T.S. Eliot and Robert Frost—three diverse Modernists. Some critics consider Stevens the greatest. His “Sunday Morning” (1915) is a secular contrast to Eliot’s “The Waste Land” (1922), the two most significant poems of the century. Like Henry James, Stevens made art his religion. Though he is a Modernist in aesthetics, techniques and affirmative Existentialism, he is Postmodernist in his atheism, hedonism, and solipsism. Hence he is more representative of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century ethos than Eliot. “Sunday Morning” idealizes the egocentric humanism that prevailed in society after the 1960s. Stevens is urbane, philosophical, challenging, playful, and sensuous—an intellectual poet grounded in the concrete. He entices curiosity and engages the mind, believing that “The poem must resist the intelligence almost successfully.” After he had written all of his poems, just before he died he was converted to Christianity and baptized, recanting the atheism of “Sunday Morning” and other poems.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, autobiographical, metaphysics, the mind, multiple points of view, reality, “unreal city,” human nature, intolerance, sex and egotism, sentimentality, love, poetry, reading poetry, the poem, style, the poet, Existentialism, imagination, consciousness, metaphor, aesthetics, hedonism, American literature, old age, final beliefs, death:

#### YOUTH

I am what is around me.

#### AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

I am a native in this world / And I think in it as a native thinks.

I certainly do not exist from nine to six, when I am at the office.

One cannot spend one's time being modern when there are so many more important things to be.

#### METAPHYSICS

The sea was not a mask.

We live in an old chaos of the sun.

The tomb in Palestine / Is not the porch of spirits lingering / It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay.

For the listener, who listens in the snow, / And, nothing himself, beholds / The nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

#### THE MIND

We live in the mind.

The mind can never be satisfied.

One must have a mind of winter. ["The Snow Man"]

Accuracy of observation is the equivalent of accuracy of thinking.

Thought is an infection. In the case of certain thoughts, it becomes an epidemic.

It is only one's thoughts that fill a room with something more than furniture.

Throw away the light, the definitions, and say what you see in the dark.

#### MULTIPLE POINTS OF VIEW

I was of three minds, / Like a tree / In which there are three blackbirds. [Modernism]

#### REALITY

What our eyes behold may well be the text of life but one's meditations on the text and the disclosures of these meditations are no less a part of the structure of reality.

#### "UNREAL CITY"

New York is a field of tireless and antagonistic interests undoubtedly fascinating but horribly unreal. [T.S. Eliot: "Unreal City. I had not thought death had undone so many."]

#### HUMAN NATURE

Human nature is like water. It takes the shape of its container.

#### INTOLERANCE

Intolerance respecting other people's religion is toleration itself in comparison with intolerance respecting other's art.

#### SEX AND EGOTISM

If some really acute observer made as much of egotism as Freud has made of sex, people would forget a good deal about sex and find the explanation for everything in egotism.

## SENTIMENTALITY

Sentimentality is a failure of feeling.

### LOVE

Next to love is the desire for love.

### POETRY

Poetry is the scholar's art.

Poetry is the subject of the poem.

Poetry is a search for the inexplicable.

Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.

People should like poetry the way a child likes snow, and they would if poets wrote it.

After one has abandoned a belief in God, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption.

There is always an analogy between nature and the imagination, and possibly poetry is merely the strange rhetoric of that parallel.

If poetry should address itself to the same needs and aspirations, the same hopes and fears, to which the Bible addresses itself, it might rival it in distribution.

## READING POETRY

Most people read poetry listening for echoes because the echoes are familiar to them. They wade through it

The way a boy wades through water, feeling with his toes for the bottom. The echoes are the bottom.

It is the unknown that excites the ardor of scholars, who, in the known alone, would shrivel up with boredom.

### THE POEM

The poem must resist the intelligence almost successfully.

It is not every day that the world arranges itself into a poem.

A poem need not have a meaning and like most things in nature often does not have.

### STYLE

A change of style is a change of meaning.

Style is not something applied. It is something that permeates. It is of the nature of that in which it is found, whether the poem, the manner of a god, the bearing of a man. It is not a dress.

### THE POET

The poet is the priest of the invisible.

A poet looks at the world as a man looks at a woman.

The philosopher proves that the philosopher exists. The poet merely enjoys existence.

Perhaps it is of more value to infuriate philosophers than to go along with them.

In an age of disbelief, or, what is the same thing, in a time that is largely humanistic, in one sense or the other, it is for the poet to supply the satisfactions of belief, in his measure and in his style.... I think of it as a role of the utmost seriousness. It is, for one thing, a spiritual role.

#### EXISTENTIALISM

Divinity must live within herself.

She was the single artificer of the world / In which she sang.

#### IMAGINATION

The imagination is man's power over nature.

The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real.

The magnificent cause of being, / The imagination, the one reality / In this imagined world.

We say that God and the imagination are one... How high that highest candle lights the dark.

When we consider the imagination as metaphysics, we realize that it is in the nature of the imagination itself that we should be quick to accept it as the only clue to reality.

If the imagination is the faculty by which we import the unreal into what is real, its value is the value of a way of thinking by which we project the idea of God into the idea of man.

We find that the operative force within us does not, in fact, seem to be the sensibility, that is to say, the feelings. It seems to be a constructive faculty, that derives its energy more from the imagination than from the sensibility.

The genuine artist is never true to life. He sees what is real, but not as we are normally aware of it. We do not go storming through life like actors in a play. Art is never real life.

Although the blue guitar is a symbol of the imagination, it is used most often simply as a reference to the individuality of the poet, meaning by the poet any man of imagination.

Let be be finale of seem. / The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

#### CONSCIOUSNESS

In the presence of extraordinary actuality, consciousness takes the place of imagination.

#### METAPHOR

There is no wing like meaning.

In metaphor (and this word is used as a symbol for the single aspect of poetry with which we are now concerned, that is to say: the creation of resemblance by the imagination, even though metamorphosis might be a better word)—in metaphor, the resemblance may be, first, between two or more parts of reality; second, between something real and something imagined...and, third, between two imagined things.

## AESTHETICS

I do not know which to prefer, / The beauty of inflections / Or the beauty of innuendoes, / The blackbird whistling / Or just after.

## HEDONISM

These are the measures destined for her soul.

A ring of men / Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn / Their boisterous devotion to the sun.

## AMERICAN LITERATURE

Nothing could be more inappropriate to American literature than its English source since the Americans are not British in sensibility.

Democritus plucked his eye out because he could not look at a woman without thinking of her as a woman. If he had read a few of our novels, he would have torn himself to pieces.

As life grows more terrible, its literature grows more terrible.

## OLD AGE

To be young is all there is in the world. They talk so beautifully about work and having a family and a home (and I do, too, sometimes)—but it's all worry and head-aches and respectable poverty and forced gushing. Telling people how nice it is, when, in reality, you would give all of your last thirty years for one of your first thirty. Old people are tremendous frauds.

Our bloom is gone. We are the fruit thereof.

## FINAL BELIEFS

God is in me or else is not at all.

The most beautiful thing in the world is, of course, the world itself.

The way through the world is more difficult to find than the way beyond it.

The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly.

## DEATH

Death is the mother of beauty.

She strews the leaves of sure obliteration on our paths.

Only the perishable can be beautiful, which is why we are unmoved by artificial flowers.

And, in the isolation of the sky, / At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make / Ambiguous undulations as they sink, / Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

[After his conversion to Christianity the month before he died]: Now I'm in the fold.

