

73 QUOTATIONS



Thornton Wilder

(1897-1975)

Thornton Wilder is best known for his Realistic masterpiece *Our Town* (1938), the most American of all plays, and for *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942), a comic allegory of human history in the contrasting style of Expressionism. Consistently popular with the public, he is one of the most versatile and prolific writers in history, achieving the highest success with both literary novels and dramas from Broadway to Hollywood. He won 3 Pulitzer Prizes, but his patriotism, traditional values and religious faith worked against him in literary circles. Elite critics considered him middle-brow, but Wilder will endure. In the tradition of Mark Twain, he affirmed and created literature for the common people in their language.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, autobiographical, politics, freedom, Americans, literature, Modernist literary influences, the theater, artsy Americans, writing, style, his works, criticism, Nature, human nature, money, pastoralism, animals, consciousness, love, marriage, suffering, aim high, death, Faith, immortality:

YOUTH

I was an old man when I was twelve.

The most valuable thing I inherited was a temperament that does not revolt against Necessity.

I came from a very strict Calvinistic father, was brought up partly among the missionaries of China, and went to that splendid college at Oberlin when the classrooms and student life carried a good deal of the pious didacticism which would now be called narrow Protestantism.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

George, the hero of a novel of mine which I wrote when I was nearly forty [*Heaven's My Destination*], is an earnest, humorless, moralizing, preachifying, interfering product of Bible-belt evangelism.

There's nothing like eavesdropping to show you that the world outside your head is different from the world inside your head.

My springboard has always been long walks. I drink a great deal, but I do not associate it with writing.

I would love to be the poet laureate of Coney Island.

If I wasn't an actor, I'd be a secret agent.

POLITICS

Gertrude Stein once said, 'Communists are people who fancied that they had an unhappy childhood.' (I think she meant that the kind of person who can persuade himself that the world would be completely happy if everyone denied himself a vast number of free decisions, is the same kind of person who could persuade himself that in early life he had been thwarted and denied all free decisions.)

Imprisonment of the body is bitter; imprisonment of the mind is worse.

FREEDOM

Choice is the sovereign faculty of the mind.

The more decisions that you are forced to make alone, the more you are aware of your freedom to choose.

The central movement of the mind is the desire for unrestricted liberty and...this movement is invariably accompanied by its opposite, a dread of the consequences of liberty.

AMERICANS

An American is unsubmissive, lonely, self-educated, and polite.

LITERATURE

"Literature" is the orchestration of platitudes.

The public for which masterpieces are intended is not of this earth.

It would be a very wonderful thing if we could see more and more works which close that gulf between highbrows and lowbrows.

MODERNIST LITERARY INFLUENCES

Among contemporaries, I am deeply indebted to Ezra Pound and Mr. Eliot.

THE THEATER

A play visibly represents pure existing.

I regard the theater as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being. This supremacy of the theater derives from the fact that it is always "now" on the stage.... The theater is so vast and fascinating a realm that there is room in it for preachers and moralists and pamphleteers. As to the highest function of the theater, I rest my case with Shakespeare—*Twelfth Night* as well as *Macbeth*.... a dramatist is one who from his earliest years has found that sheer gazing at the shocks and countershocks among people is quite sufficiently engrossing without having to encase it in comment. It's a form of tact. It's a lack of presumption. That's why so many earnest people have been so exasperated by Shakespeare. They cannot isolate the passages wherein we hear him speaking in his own voice.

ARTSY AMERICANS

One of the dangers of the American artist is that he finds himself almost exclusively thrown in with persons more or less in the arts.

Like all the cultivated he believed that only the widely read could be said to know that they were unhappy.

WRITING

An incinerator is a writer's best friend.

In advertising, not to be different is virtual suicide.

If you write to impress it will always be bad, but if you write to express it will be good.

The theatre is supremely fitted to say: "Behold! These things are." Yet most dramatists employ it to say "This moral truth can be learned from beholding this action."

Many plays—certainly mine—are like blank checks. The actors and directors put their own signatures on them.

STYLE

The whole purport of literature...is the notation of the heart. Style is but the faintly contemptible vessel in which the bitter liquid is recommended to the world.

As her technique became sounder, [her] sincerity became less necessary.

HIS WORKS

Many thank me for the 'comfort' they found in the last act of *Our Town*; others tell me that it is a desolating picture of our limitation to 'realize' life—almost too sad to endure.

The Skin of Our Teeth, which takes five thousand years to go by, is really a way of trying to make sense out of the *multiplicity* of the human race and its affections. So that I see myself making an effort to find the dignity in the trivial of our daily life, against those preposterous stretches which seem to rob it of any such dignity; and the validity of each individual's emotion.

In *The Ides of March*, my ideas are more illustrated than stated. Love started out as a concomitant of reproduction; it is what makes new life and then shelters it. It is therefore an affirmation about existence and a belief in value. Tens of thousands of years have gone by; more complicated forms of consciousness have arisen. Love acquired a wide variety of secondary expressions. It got mixed up with a power conflict between male and female; it got cut off from its primary intention and took its place among the refinements of psychic life, and in the cult of pleasure; it expanded beyond the relations of the couple and the family and reappeared as philanthropy; it attached itself to man's idea about the order of the universe and was attributed to the gods and God. I always see beneath it, nevertheless, the urge that strives toward justifying life, harmonizing it—the source of energy on which life must draw in order to better itself. In *Ides of March* I illustrate its educative power...and its power to "crystallize" idealization in the lover.

CRITICISM

The critic that is in every fabulist is like the iceberg—nine tenths of him is under water.

NATURE

Nature reserves the right to inflict upon her children the most terrifying jests.

HUMAN NATURE

Pride, avarice, and envy are in every home.

[Whenever] you get near the human race, there's layers and layers of nonsense.

Ninety-nine percent of the people in the world are fools and the rest of us are in great danger of contagion.

It's your combination sinners—your lecherous liars and your miserly drunkards—who dishonor the vices and bring them into bad repute.

That's what it was like to be alive. To move about in a cloud of ignorance; to go up and down trampling on the feelings...of those about you. To spend and waste time as though you had a million years. To be always at the mercy of one self-centered passion, or another.

The people of this world moved about in an armor of egotism, drunk with self-gazing, athirst for compliments, hearing little of what was said to them, unmoved by the accidents that befell their closest friends, in dread of all appeals that might interrupt their long communion with their own desires.

MONEY

Money is like manure; it's not worth a thing unless it's spread around encouraging young things to grow.

PASTORALISM

My advice to you is not to inquire why or whither, but just enjoy your ice cream while it is on your plate.

It's when you're safe at home that you wish you were having an adventure. When you're having an adventure you wish you were safe at home.

ANIMALS

The best thing about animals is they don't talk much.

It is only dogs that never bite their masters.

CONSCIOUSNESS

Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?

Only those who have grasped their non-being are capable of praising the sunlight.

We can only be said to be alive in those moments when our hearts are conscious of our treasures.

LOVE

Love is its own eternity.

Love is an energy which exists of itself. It is its own value.

In love's service, only the wounded soldier can serve.

Many who have spent a lifetime...can tell us less of love than the child that lost a dog yesterday.

The knowledge that she would never be loved in return acted upon her ideas as a tide acts upon cliffs.

Even memory is not necessary for love. There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.

He regarded love as a sort of cruel malady through which the elect are required to pass in their late youth and from which they emerge, pale and wrung, but ready for the business of living.

Love as education is one of the great powers of the world, but it hangs in a delicate suspension; it achieves its harmony as seldom as does love by the senses. Frustrated, it creates even greater havoc, for like all love it is a madness.

He divided the inhabitants of this world into two groups, into those who had loved and those who had not. It was a horrible aristocracy, apparently, for those who had no capacity for love (or rather for suffering in love) could not be said to be alive and certainly would not live again after their death. They were a kind of straw population, filling the world with their meaningless laughter and tears and chatter and disappearing still loveable and vain into thin air.

He respected the slight nervous shadow that crossed her face when he came too near her. But there arose out of this denial itself the perfume of a tenderness, that ghost of passion which, in the most unexpected relationship, can make even a whole lifetime devoted to irksome duty pass like a gracious dream.

Now he discovered that secret from which one never quite recovers, that even in the most perfect love one person loves less profoundly than the other. There may be two equally good, equally gifted, equally beautiful, but there may never be two that love one another equally well.

There is no drunkenness equal to that of remembering whispered words in the night.

MARRIAGE

People are meant to go through life two by two. 'Tain't natural to be lonesome.

Marriage is a bribe to make the housekeeper think she's a householder.

SUFFERING

When God loves a creature he wants the creature to know the highest happiness and the deepest misery. He wants him to know all that being alive can bring. That is his best gift. There is no happiness save in understanding the whole.

For what human ill does not dawn seem to be an alleviation?

AIM HIGH

Providence has nothing good or high in store for one who does not resolutely aim at something high or good. A purpose is the eternal condition of success.

Seek the lofty by reading, hearing and seeing great work at some moment every day.

DEATH

Either we live by accident and die by accident, or we live by plan and die by plan.

All that we know about those we have loved and lost is that they would wish us to remember them with a more intensified realization of their reality. What is essential does not die but clarifies. The highest tribute to the dead is not grief but gratitude.

FAITH

Faith is a never-ending pool of clarity, reaching far beyond the margins of consciousness.

We all know more than we know we know.

IMMORTALITY

The dead don't stay interested in us living people for very long. Gradually, gradually, they let go hold of the earth...and the ambitions they had...and the pleasures they had...and the things they suffered...and the people they loved. They get weaned away from earth...

We all know that something is eternal...everybody knows in their bones that something is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings. All the greatest people ever lived have been telling us that for five thousand years and yet you'd be surprised how people are always losing hold of it. There's something way down deep that's eternal about every human being.

Man is not an end but a beginning.

Some of these quotations are excerpted from
"Thornton Wilder" (1956)
Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews
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