110 QUOTATIONS



James Thurber

(1894-1961)

James Thurber is one of the most popular humorists of the 20th century. His mother was a natural comic who inspired his wit. Later he said, as Mark Twain once did, that his humor is serious. As a boy, playing a game of William Tell, one of his two brothers shot him in the eye with an arrow. He lost the eye and eventually went almost completely blind. He learned to write in his head for hours and then dictate from memory. He worked as a journalist, moved to Greenwich Village and got a job with the *New Yorker* in 1927. Promoted by his friend at the magazine, E.B. White, he published there a diversity of writing, including essays and stories and over 75 satirical fables, the most famous of which is "The Unicorn in the Garden." Otherwise he is best known for stories including "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," "The Catbird Seat," "If Grant Had Been Drinking at Appomattox," and his baseball tall tale about a short walk-on "You Could Look It Up." E.B. White got him started as a cartoonist. Thurber did covers and many drawings and illustrations for the *New Yorker* in tentative and wandering lines as if, as readers wrote him, written under water. Dorothy Parker described them as having "the semblance of unbaked cookies." Thurber married twice, had a daughter, loved dogs and competed in dog shows with poodles. During the year of his divorce he published a collection, *The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze*, including several stories about conflicts in marriage, also a common subject of his cartoons.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, autobiographical, Lost Generation, consciousness, revised maxims, women, love, marriage, human nature, philosophy, America, liberal economics, writing, language, how to write, literature, drawings, humor and wit, laughter, dogs, old age, time, alcohol, death, last words, immortality:

YOUTH

Unless artists can remember what it was to be a little boy, they are only half complete as artist and as man.

Boys are beyond the range of anybody's sure understanding, at least when they are between the ages of 18 months and 90 years.

Salvador [Dali] was brought up in Spain, a country colored by the legends of Hannibal, El Greco, and Cervantes. I was brought up in Ohio, a region steeped in the tradition of Coxey's Army, the Anti-Saloon League, and William Howard Taft.

"For God, for country, and for Yale," the outstanding single anti-climax in the English language.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

We all have faults, and mine is being wicked.

Ross gave me a job [on *The New Yorker*] because he convinced himself I was an old pal of E.B. White. I tried to tell him I had met White for the first time on the way to his office, but he wouldn't listen. I thought I was hired to be a writer…. It took me eight years of solid writing to persuade Ross to make somebody else his confounded managing editor.

LOST GENERATION

"You are all a lost generation," Gertrude Stein said to Hemingway. We weren't lost. We knew where we were, all right, but we wouldn't go home. Ours was the generation that stayed up all night.

CONSCIOUSNESS

Sixty minutes of thinking of any kind is bound to lead to confusion and unhappiness.

I used to wake up at 4 a.m. and start sneezing, sometimes for five hours. I tried to find out what sort of allergy I had but finally came to the conclusion that it must be an allergy to consciousness.

I do not have a psychiatrist and I do not want one, for the simple reason that if he listened to me long enough, he might become disturbed.

The sanity of the average banquet speaker lasts about two and a half months, at the end of that time he begins to mutter to himself, and calls out in his sleep.

Well, if I called the wrong number, why did you answer the phone?

REVISED MAXIMS

He who hesitates is sometimes saved.

Nowadays men lead lives of noisy desperation.

A burden in the bush is worth two on your hands.

There is no safety in numbers, or in anything else.

A pinch of probability is worth a pound of perhaps.

You can fool too many of the people too much of the time.

A word to the wise is not sufficient if it doesn't make sense.

Why do you have to be a nonconformist like everybody else?

You might as well fall flat on your face as lean over too far backward.

Early to rise and early to bed makes a man healthy, wealthy and dead.

It is better to have loafed and lost, than never to have loafed at all.

WOMEN

Women's place is in the wrong.

What the wrong needs is a woman's presence and a woman's touch. She is far better equipped than men to set it right.

Though statisticians in our time have never kept the score, man wants a great deal here below and woman even more.

[Response to a drunk woman at a party who told him she wanted to have his baby]: Surely you don't mean by unartificial insemination!

It is better to know some of the questions than all of the answers.

Women are wiser than men because they know less and understand more.

I hate women because they always know where things are.

I think that if women and children were in charge we would get somewhere.

There is no exception to the rule that every rule has an exception.

It was Lisa, aged five, whose mother asked her to thank my wife for the peas we had sent them from our garden. "I thought the peas were awful, I wish you and Mrs. Thurber were dead, and I hate trees," said Lisa.

Her own mother lived the latter years of her life in the horrible suspicion that electricity was dripping invisibly all over the house.

My mother, for instance, thought--or rather, knew--that it was dangerous to drive an automobile without gasoline: it fried the valves, or something. "Now don't you dare drive all over town without gasoline," she would say to us when we started off.

If I have sometimes seemed to make fun of Woman, I assure you it has only been for the purpose of egging her on.

I think [women] deserve to have more than twelve years between the ages of 28 and 40.

She wasn't much to look at but she was something to think about.

LOVE

Love is what you've been through with somebody.

Love is the strange bewilderment that overtakes one person on account of another person.

Love, which was once believed to contain the Answer, we now know to be nothing more than an inherited behavior pattern.

All men kill the thing they hate, too, unless, of course, it kills them first.

MARRIAGE

The most dangerous food is wedding cake.

Mutual suspicions of mental inadequacy are common during the first year of any marriage.

Sophistication might be described as the ability to cope gracefully with a situation involving the presence of a formidable menace to one's poise and prestige (such as the butler, or the man under the bed—but never the husband).

The paths of glory may lead to the grave, but the paths of duty may not get you anywhere.

HUMAN NATURE

Two is company, three is a crowd, four is a party. One is a wanderer.

One has but to observe a community of beavers at work in a stream to understand the loss in his sagacity, balance, co-operation, competence, and purpose which Man has suffered since he rose up on his hind legs. He began to chatter and he developed Reason, Thought, and Imagination, qualities which would get the smartest group of rabbits or orioles in the world into inextricable trouble overnight.

Human dignity has gleamed only now and then, in lonely splendor, throughout the ages, a hope of the better men, never an achievement of the majority.

Man has gone long enough, or even too long, without being man enough to face the simple truth that the trouble with man is man.

PHILOSOPHY

Don't let that chip on your shoulder be your only reason for walking erect.

Let us not look back in anger, nor forward in fear, but around with awareness.

Every man is occasionally visited by the suspicion that the planet on which he is riding is not really going anywhere; that the Force which controls its measured eccentricities hasn't got anything special in mind. If he broods on this somber theme long enough he gets the doleful idea that the laughing children on a merry-go-round or the thin, fine hands of a lady's watch are revolving more purposely than he is.

We all know that the theater and every play that comes to Broadway have within themselves, like the human being, the seed of self-destruction and the certainty of death. The thing is to see how long the theater, the play, and the human being can last in spite of themselves.

Man is flying too fast for a world that is round. Soon he will catch up with himself in a great rear end collision.

AMERICA

Discussion in America means dissent.

Progress was all right. Only it went on too long.

The difference between our decadence and the Russians' is that while theirs is brutal, ours is apathetic.

The English treat the commonplace as if it were remarkable and the Americans treat the remarkable as if it were commonplace.

In other countries, art and literature are left to a lot of shabby bums living in attics and feeding on booze and spaghetti. [This line was borrowed from *Babbitt* (1922) by Sinclair Lewis]

The nation that complacently and fearfully allows its artists and writers to become suspected rather than respected is no longer regarded as a nation possessed with humor and depth. [Liberal reaction to exposure of Communists and their liberal supporters in Hollywood and the arts during the 1940s-50s]

LIBERAL ECONOMICS

The animals that depend on instinct have an inherent knowledge of the laws of economics and of how to apply them; Man, with his powers of reason, has reduced economics to the level of a farce which is at once funnier and more tragic than Tobacco Road.

Last night I dreamed of a small consolation enjoyed only by the blind. Nobody knows the trouble I've not seen.

WRITING

It had only one fault. It was kind of lousy.

The first or second draft of everything I write reads as if it were turned out by a charwoman.

My pieces came back so fast I began to believe the *New Yorker* must have a rejection machine.

So much has already been written about everything that you can't find out anything about it.

I don't believe the writer should know too much where he's going. If he does, he runs into old man blueprint--old man propaganda.

Sometimes my wife comes up to me at a party and says, Dammit, Thurber, stop writing. She usually catches me in the middle of a paragraph.

The original of Walter Mitty is every other man I have ever known. When the story was printed in the *New Yorker*…six men from around the country, including a Des Moines dentist, wrote and asked me how I got to know them so well.

LANGUAGE

My opposition to interviews lies in the fact that offhand answers have little value or grace of expression, and that such oral give and take helps to perpetuate the decline of the English language.

Ours is a precarious language, as every writer knows, in which the merest shadow line often separates affirmation from negation, sense from nonsense, and one sex from the other.

A false or misunderstood word may create as much disaster as a sudden thoughtless act.

HOW TO WRITE

I always begin at the left with the opening word of the sentence and read toward the right and I recommend this method.

When all things are equal, translucence in writing is more effective than transparency, just as glow is more revealing than glare.

There are two kinds of light--the glow that illuminates and the glare that obscures.

LITERATURE

There is something about a poet which leads us to believe that he died, in many cases, as long as 20 years before his birth.

But those rare souls whose spirit gets magically into the hearts of men, leave behind them something more real and warmly personal than bodily presence, an ineffable and eternal thing.

I have the reputation of having read all of Henry James. Which would argue a misspent youth *and* middle age…. That's the trouble with James. You get bored with him finally.

Most of the books I like are short books: *The Red Badge of Courage, The Turn of the Screw,* Conrad's short stories, *A Lost Lady…The Great Gatsby…*

Everybody wants to know if I've learned from Mark Twain. Actually I've never read much of him.

DRAWINGS

A drawing is always dragged down to the level of its caption.

My drawings have been described as pre-internationalist, meaning that they were finished before the ideas for them had occurred to me.

He knows all about art, but he doesn't know what he likes.

HUMOR AND WIT

Humor is emotional chaos remembered in tranquility.

The only rules comedy can tolerate are those of taste, and the only limitations those of libel.

The wit makes fun of other persons; the satirist makes fun of the world; the humorist makes fun of himself.

Humor is a serious thing. I like to think of it as one of our greatest earliest natural resources, which must be preserved at all cost.

You can't blunt the edge of wit or the point of satire with obscurity. Try to imagine a famous witty saying that is not immediately clear.

Any humorist must be interested in trivia, in every little thing that occurs in a household. It's what Robert Benchley did so well--in fact so well that one of the greatest fears of the humorous writer is that he has spent three weeks writing something done faster and better by Benchley in 1919.

LAUGHTER

Laughter need not be cut out of anything, since it improves everything.

The laughter of man is more terrible than his tears, and takes more forms--hollow, heartless, mirthless, maniacal.

DOGS

I have always thought of a dog lover as a dog that was in love with another dog.

I am not a cat man, but a dog man, and all felines can tell this at a glance--a sharp, vindictive glance.

The dog has seldom been successful in pulling man up to its level of sagacity, but man has frequently dragged the dog down to his.

The dog has got more fun out of Man than Man has got out of the dog, for the clearly demonstrable reason that Man is the more laughable of the two animals.

OLD AGE

Old age is the most unexpected of all the things that can happen to a man.

When I met Hemingway with John O'Hara in Costello's Bar five or six years ago we sat around and talked about how *old* we were getting.

I have outlived certain desires; I have lost friends, some by death...others through sheer inability to cross the street.

With sixty staring me in the face, I have developed inflammation of the sentence structure and definite hardening of the paragraphs.

TIME

The past is an old armchair in the attic, the present an ominous ticking sound, and the future is anybody's guess.

ALCOHOL

One martini is all right. Two are too many, and three are not enough.

It's a naïve domestic Burgundy without any breeding, but I think you'll be amused by its presumption.

Alcohol…produces vivid patterns of Truth which vanish like snow in the morning sun and cannot be recalled.

Some American writers who have known each other for years have never met in the daytime or when both were sober.

DEATH

Where most of us end up there is no knowing, but the hell-bent get where they are going.

All human beings should try to learn before they die, what they are running from, and to, and why.

LAST WORDS

God bless… God damn…

IMMORTALITY

But what is all this fear of and opposition to Oblivion? What is the matter with the soft Darkness, the Dreamless Sleep?

If I have any beliefs about immortality, it is that certain dogs I have known will go to heaven, and very, very few persons.

Remember laughter. You'll need it even in the blessed isles of Ever After.

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