

The Oxford Dictionary of  
**Literary Quotations**

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# Preface to Second Edition

No dictionary of literary quotations could hope to be the last word on the subject. So the opportunity of returning to this book in order to revise, refresh and enlarge it has been a welcome one. By reorganizing the format and sifting out material that seemed dated or repetitive, it has been possible to add almost nine hundred new quotations about writers and writing.

As might be expected, some of these reflect developments in the literary world over the last few years. The arrival of phenomena such as Harry Potter is registered, as is the departure of some familiar figures (defending the killing-off of his Inspector Morse, Colin Dexter declared, 'I have contributed quite enough to the "crime scene", since I am reliably informed that I am responsible for 81 body-bags in and around Oxford, including three Heads of Colleges'). Ted Hughes's observations about his 1997 versions of tales from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* ('the seeds of European literature') tellingly testify to the persisting connections between recent writers and their distant predecessors.

Bringing things up to date hasn't been the only satisfaction in preparing this new edition. Fascinating quotations have turned up from remote eras. Fearsome penalties invoked against remiss users of a clay-tablet library in ancient Assyria make our present system of fines look absurdly lenient: the gods are called upon to punish anyone 'who breaks this tablet or puts it in water or rubs it until you cannot recognize it' with 'a curse which cannot be relieved, terrible and merciless, as long as he lives, may they let his name, his seed, be carried off from the land, may they put his flesh in a dog's mouth!' At the opposite extreme to this ferocious state of affairs, from the Egypt of Ramses II (1279-1213 BC) comes an inscription soothingly describing a library as a 'Clinic for the Soul'.

Expanded geographically as well as historically, this edition brings in additional findings from areas such as North America and Australia, as well as further quotations from non-anglophone sources. Portugal's great nineteenth-century novelist, Eça de Queiroz, comments with amused irony on the English taste for romantic novels, which are sold 'much like tea and tobacco' and 'read in much the same way as a cigar is smoked or a cup of tea is drunk'. In a chilling couple of sentences, Adolf Hitler reveals, 'Without my imprisonment, *Mein Kampf* would never have been written. That period gave me the chance of deepening various notions for which I then had only an instinctive feeling.'

Hitler's remark is to be found among the quotations grouped under Solitude, one of a number of new themes incorporated into this book. Others include Collaboration, Interruption, Illustration, Omission, Graffiti, and those ultimate literary pronouncements, Epitaphs. Where its predecessor was divided into two parts—The Writer's World and Writers and their Works—this edition dovetails them into a single alphabetical sequence of topics and authors. The re-design should, it is intended, make reference easier and quicker, while still encouraging browsing.

This anthology owes much to the knowledge and generosity of friends, whom I wish to thank for their assistance. Besides continuing contributions from some who helped with the earlier volume, I am indebted for useful material to Andrew Holgate, Caroline Gascoigne, John Dugdale, and Terence Blacker. John Gross offered numerous invaluable suggestions and Mark Lawson alerted me to sources of quotations that have enriched the book. I should also like to express my gratitude to Oxford University Press for giving me the chance to prepare this new edition of the dictionary, and to Susan Ratcliffe, in particular, for the unfailing expertise and shrewdness she has brought to every stage of the production of the final text.

As before, the compiling of *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Quotations* has been both pleasurable and thought-provoking. That readers should also find it so is the book's aim.

PETER KEMP

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- 1 It is a wretched taste to be gratified with mediocrity when the excellent lies before us.
- 2 Too many flowers . . . too little fruit.  
*describing the work of Felicia Hemans*
- 3 Clear writers, like clear fountains, do not seem so deep as they are; the turbid look the most profound.
- 4 People don't deserve to have good writing, they are so pleased with bad.
- 5 The amount of a certain sort of emasculate twaddle produced in the United States is not encouraging.
- 6 The best is the best, though a hundred judges have declared it so.
- 7 The literary gift is a mere accident—is as often bestowed on idiots who have nothing to say worth hearing as it is denied to strenuous sages.
- 8 A good novel tells us the truth about its hero; but a bad novel tells us the truth about its author.
- 9 This of course is not what he was trying to say, but the pen is mightier than the wrist.
- 10 It is far easier to write ten passably effective sonnets, good enough to take in the not too inquiring critic, than one effective advertisement that will take in a few thousand of the uncritical buying public.
- 11 Only two classes of books are of universal appeal. The very best and the very worst.
- 12 We are nauseated by the sight of trivial personalities decomposing in the eternity of print.
- 13 It is with noble sentiments that bad literature gets written.
- 14 A bad book is as much of a labour to write as a good one; it comes as sincerely from the author's soul.
- 15 What I like in a good author is not what he says, but what he whispers.
- 16 A great writer creates a world of his own and his readers are proud to live in it. A lesser writer may entice them in for a moment, but soon he will watch them filing out.
- 17 All good writing is *swimming under water* and holding your breath.
- 18 The more books we read, the sooner we perceive that the only function of a writer is to produce a masterpiece. No other task is of any consequence.
- 19 Good poets have a weakness for bad puns.
- 20 The world is over-stocked with people who are ready and eager to teach other people to write. It seems astonishing that so much bad writing should find its way into print when so much good advice is to be had.

**Isaac D'Israeli** 1766–1848: *Curiosities of Literature. Second Series* (1823)

**Sir Walter Scott** 1771–1832: letter to Joanna Baillie, 18 July 1823

**Walter Savage Landor** 1775–1864: *Imaginary Conversations* (1824) 'Southey and Porson'

**Ralph Waldo Emerson** 1803–82: *Journals* 1841

**Henry James** 1843–1916: letter, 14 September 1879

**Arthur Quiller-Couch** 1863–1944: *Oxford Book of English Verse* (1900) preface

**Max Beerbohm** 1872–1956: letter to George Bernard Shaw, 21 September 1903

**G. K. Chesterton** 1874–1936: *Heretics* (1905)

**A. E. Housman** 1859–1936: in *Classical Review* 1920; see **227:6**

**Aldous Huxley** 1894–1963: *On the Margin* (1923) 'Advertisement'

**Ford Madox Ford** 1873–1939: *Joseph Conrad* (1924)

**Virginia Woolf** 1882–1941: *The Common Reader* (1925) 'The Modern Essay'

**André Gide** 1869–1951: letter to François Mauriac, 1928

**Aldous Huxley** 1894–1963: *Point Counter Point* (1928)

**Logan Pearsall Smith** 1865–1946: *All Trivia* (1933) 'Afterthoughts'

**Cyril Connolly** 1903–74: *Enemies of Promise* (1938)

**F. Scott Fitzgerald** 1896–1940: letter (undated) to Frances Scott Fitzgerald

**Cyril Connolly** 1903–74: *The Unquiet Grave* (1944)

**W. H. Auden** 1907–73: 'The Shield of Achilles' (1955)

**Robertson Davies** 1913–95: in 1959; *The Enthusiasms of Robertson Davies* (1990)

- 1 You know you're writing well when you're throwing good stuff into the wastebasket.
- 2 There's only one real sin, and that is to persuade oneself that the second-best is anything but the second-best.
- 3 Mediocrity is more dangerous in a critic than in a writer.
- 4 This is not a novel to be tossed aside lightly. It should be thrown with great force.
- 5 I suspect that the reason that the ability to write good prose and good dialogue go hand-in-hand is simply that a good writer knows how to listen.
- 6 For a writer, the bad elements stand out like a boil. It's all very well to recognize that a boil is only a part of the body, it's still disproportionately obtrusive.
- 7 Nothing we write, if we hope to be any good, will ever turn out as we first thought.
- Ernest Hemingway** 1899–1961: attributed
- Doris Lessing** 1919– : *Golden Notebook* (1962)
- Eugène Ionesco** 1912–94: attributed, 1966
- Dorothy Parker** 1893–1967: R. E. Drennan *Wit's End* (1973)
- John Braine** 1922–86: *Writing a Novel* (1974)
- Graham Greene** 1904–91: Marie-Françoise Allain *The Other Man, Conversations with Graham Greene* (1983)
- Lillian Hellman** 1905–84: attributed

## **Maxim Gorky** 1868–1936 Russian writer and revolutionary

- 8 The question of what man *is* really meant, for Gorky, what man can become.
- Eugene Lampert** 1913– : Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (eds.) *Modernism* (1991)

## **The Gothic** see **Horror and the Gothic**

### **Graffiti**

- 9 Popular education was bringing the graffito lower on the walls.
- 10 One reaches a time of life when limericks written on the walls of comfort stations are not just obscene, they are horribly dull.
- 11 Italians . . . find sculpture irresistible to their bios.
- 12 In the dime stores and bus stations,  
People talk of situations,  
Read books, repeat quotations,  
Draw conclusions on the wall.
- 13 Mark my words, when a society has to resort to the lavatory for its humour, the writing is on the wall.
- 14 If God had not meant us to write on walls he would never have set us an example.
- Oliver St John Gogarty** 1878–1957: *As I was Going Down Sackville Street* (1937)
- Raymond Chandler** 1888–1959: letter to Blanche Knopf, 27 March 1946
- James Lees-Milne** 1908–97: *Midway on the Waves: Diaries 1948–49* (1985) 20 Feb 1949
- Bob Dylan** 1941– : 'Love Minus Zero/No Limit' (1965 song)
- Alan Bennett** 1934– : *Forty Years On* (1969)
- Anonymous**: Nigel Rees *Graffiti 2* (1980)

## Grammar and Usage see also Spelling

- 1 *Multa renascentur quae iam cecidere, cadentque  
Quae nunc sunt in honore vocabula, si volet usus,  
Quem penes arbitrium est et ius et norma loquendi.*  
Many terms which have now dropped out of favour will be revived, and those that are at present respectable will drop out, if usage so choose, with whom lies the decision, the judgement, and the rule of speech.
- 2 Grammar, the ground of al.
- 3 Syllables govern the world.
- 4 I have laboured to refine our language to grammatical purity, and to clear it from colloquial barbarisms, licentious idioms, and irregular combinations.
- 5 An aspersion upon my parts of speech!
- 6 In language, the ignorant have prescribed laws to the learned.
- 7 Correct English is the slang of prigs who write history and essays. And the strongest slang of all is the slang of poets.
- 8 For first you write a sentence,  
And then you chop it small;  
Then mix the bits, and sort them out  
Just as they chance to fall:  
The order of the phrases makes  
No difference at all.
- 9 I will not go down to posterity talking bad grammar.  
*while correcting proofs of his last Parliamentary speech, 31  
March 1881*
- 10 Good intentions are invariably ungrammatical.
- 11 Prefer geniality to grammar.
- 12 Damn the subjunctive. It brings all our writers to shame.
- 13 Only presidents, editors, and people with tapeworms have the right to use the editorial 'we'.
- 14 I'm glad you like adverbs—I adore them.
- 15 I don't want to talk grammar, I want to talk like a lady.
- 16 Adjectives are the sugar of literature and adverbs the salt.
- 17 The English-speaking world may be divided into (1) those who neither know nor care what a split infinitive is; (2) those who do not know, but care very much; (3) those who know and condemn; (4) those who know and distinguish. Those who neither know nor care are the vast
- Horace** 65–8 BC: *Ars Poetica*
- William Langland** c.1330–c.1400:  
*The Vision of Piers Plowman*
- John Selden** 1584–1654: *Table Talk* (1689)
- Samuel Johnson** 1709–84: in *The Rambler* 14 March 1752
- Richard Brinsley Sheridan**  
1751–1816: *The Rivals* (1775)
- Richard Duppa** 1770–1831: *Maxims* (1830)
- George Eliot** 1819–80: *Middlemarch* (1871–2)
- Lewis Carroll** 1832–98:  
'Phantasmagoria' (1876)
- Benjamin Disraeli** 1804–81: Robert Blake *Disraeli* (1966)
- Oscar Wilde** 1854–1900: attributed
- H. W. Fowler** 1858–1933 and **F. G. Fowler** 1870–1918: *The King's English* (1906)
- Mark Twain** 1835–1910: *Notebook* (1935)
- Mark Twain** 1835–1910: attributed
- Henry James** 1843–1916: letter to Miss Edwards, 5 January 1912
- George Bernard Shaw** 1856–1950: *Pygmalion* (1916)
- Henry James** 1843–1916: Theodora Bosanquet *Henry James at Work* (1924)
- H. W. Fowler** 1858–1933: *Modern English Usage* (1926)