

## Pithy Prose: The Wit & Wisdom of Oscar Wilde

by Philip Yaffe

Part 2 of an occasional series

I am a collector of quotations. I have been ever since I learned how to write, I mean professionally, not in primary school.

I am particularly fond of what I like to call "pithy prose". These short quotations can cover an unlimited variety of subjects: love, religion, politics, human nature, etc. What unites them is their ability to say more in one or two sentences than could be expressed in a thousand-word treatise. It's like being able to pour a liter of liquid into a half-liter bottle.

They are superb examples of Mark Twain's famous dictum, "The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug."

In principle, all writers and public speakers are capable of producing pithy prose, but clearly some are better at it than others.

Any collection of pithy prose must necessarily be biased in terms of what it includes and excludes. I make no apologies for my selections, only for the hundreds of other meritorious quotations I had to leave out.

No one will agree with all these quotations; this was not their intention. You may even find some of them repugnant or outrageous. This was their intention.

We seldom learn anything of value from what we already agree with. Only those ideas that grate on our nerves can open our minds. As with oysters, irritation can produce pearls. So if anything you are about to read annoys or shocks you, try to think clearly and dispassionately about what it is saying. You will either be confirmed in your current belief or shaken into re-examining it.

Either way, you win!

This article is part of an occasional series. In each article, I will be offering more amusing, educating, and exasperating quotations to your judgment. But just to be certain that we agree on what we are talking about, here it is in a nutshell.

Pithy Prose: A quotation where at first you may not be quite certain what it means. But when you become certain, you become equally certain that it couldn't have been said better any other way. In short, big ideas in small packages.

If you have a better definition of pithy prose, please contact me. I would love to hear it.

Who Is Oscar Wilde?

Oscar Wilde (1854 - 1900), whose full name was Oscar Fingal O'Flaherty Wills Wilde, was a renowned Irish dramatist, novelist, and poet. His best

known plays are "The Importance of Being Earnest", "Lady Windermere's Fan", and "An Ideal Husband", three delicious society farces. "The Picture of Dorian Gray", his only novel, a dark tragedy, is considered to be a classic.

In 1895 Wilde was imprisoned for two years for homosexual offenses. "The love that dare not speak its name", a euphemism for homosexuality. Is closely associated with Wilde because he used it during his trial. However, the phrase actually comes from the poem "Two Loves", published in 1894 by Lord Alfred Douglas.

Wilde was widely known for his barbed wit, which is clearly reflected in the following quotations.

1. A cynic is a man who knows the price of everything but the value of nothing.
2. A dreamer is one who can only find his way by moonlight, and his punishment is that he sees the dawn before the rest of the world.
3. A gentleman is one who never hurts anyone's feelings unintentionally.
4. A man who does not think for himself does not think at all.
5. A man's face is his autobiography. A woman's face is her work of fiction.
6. A thing is not necessarily true because a man dies for it.
7. A true friend stabs you in the front.
8. All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his.
9. Always forgive your enemies - nothing annoys them so much.
10. An idea that is not dangerous is unworthy of being called an idea at all.
11. As long as war is regarded as wicked, it will always have its fascination. When it is looked upon as vulgar, it will cease to be popular.
12. Bigamy is having one wife too many. Monogamy is the same.
13. By giving us the opinions of the uneducated, journalism keeps us in touch with the ignorance of the community.
14. Children begin by loving their parents; after a time they judge them; rarely, if ever, do they forgive them.

15. Fashion is a form of ugliness so intolerable that we have to alter it every six months.
16. I always pass on good advice. It is the only thing to do with it. It is never of any use to oneself.
17. I am so clever that sometimes I don't understand a single word of what I am saying.
18. I can resist everything except temptation.
19. I choose my friends for their good looks, my acquaintances for their good characters, and my enemies for their intellects. A man cannot be too careful in the choice of his enemies.
20. I sometimes think that God in creating man somewhat overestimated his ability.
21. If there was less sympathy in the world, there would be less trouble in the world.
22. Illusion is the first of all pleasures.
23. Life is never fair, and perhaps it is a good thing for most of us that it is not.
24. Man can believe the impossible, but man can never believe the improbable.
25. Man is a rational animal who always loses his temper when he is called upon to act in accordance with the dictates of reason.
26. One's real life is so often the life that one does not lead.
27. Pessimist: One who, when he has the choice of two evils, chooses both.
28. Society exists only as a mental concept; in the real world there are only individuals.
29. The critic has to educate the public; the artist has to educate the critic.
30. The cynic knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.
31. The only thing to do with good advice is to pass it on. It is never of any use to oneself.
32. The pure and simple truth is rarely pure and never simple.

33. The well bred contradict other people. The wise contradict themselves.
34. The world is a stage, but the play is badly cast.
35. There are many things that we would throw away if we were not afraid that others might pick them up.
36. There is a luxury in self-reproach. When we blame ourselves we feel no one else has a right to blame us.
37. There is always something ridiculous about the emotions of people whom one has ceased to love.
38. This suspense is terrible. I hope it will last.
39. To expect the unexpected shows a thoroughly modern intellect.
40. We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.
41. When the gods wish to punish us, they answer our prayers.
42. Whenever a man does a thoroughly stupid thing, it is always from the noblest motives.
43. Whenever people agree with me, I always feel I must be wrong.
44. Woman begins by resisting a man's advances and ends by blocking his retreat.

Previously in this Series

Part 1: Pithy Prose: The Wit & Wisdom of Mark Twain

Philip Yaffe is a former reporter/feature writer with The Wall Street Journal and a marketing communication consultant. He currently teaches a course in good writing and good speaking in Brussels, Belgium. His recently published book *In the "I" of the Storm: the Simple Secrets of Writing & Speaking (Almost) like a Professional* is available from Story Publishers in Ghent, Belgium ([storypublishers.be](http://storypublishers.be)) and Amazon ([amazon.com](http://amazon.com)).

### About the Author

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