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Quotes by Auden, W. H.

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Wystan Hugh Auden, known more commonly as W. H. Auden, (February 21, 1907 - September 29, 1973) was an English poet, often cited as one of the most influential of the 20th century. He spent the first part of his life in the United Kingdom, but emigrated to the United States in 1939, becoming a U.S. citizen in 1946.

The class distinctions proper to a democratic society are not those of rank or money, still less, as is apt to happen when these are abandoned, of race, but of age.

- Auden, W. H.

In a land which is fully settled, most men must accept their local environment or try to change it by political means; only the exceptionally gifted or adventurous can leave to seek his fortune elsewhere. In America, on the other hand, to move on and make a fresh start somewhere else is still the normal reaction to dissatisfaction and failure.

- Auden, W. H.

A doctor, like anyone else who has to deal with human beings, each of them unique, cannot be a scientist; he is either, like the surgeon, a craftsman, or, like the physician and the psychologist, an artist. This means that in order to be a good doctor a man must also have a good character, that is to say, whatever weaknesses and foibles he may have, he must love his fellow human beings in the concrete and desire their good before his own.

- Auden, W. H.

A daydream is a meal at which images are eaten. Some of us are gourmets, some gourmands, and a good many take their images precooked out of a can and swallow them down whole, absent-mindedly and with little relish.

- Auden, W. H.

Evil is unspectacular and always human, and shares our bed and eats at our own table.

- Auden, W. H.

America has always been a country of amateurs where the professional, that is to say, the man who claims authority as a member of an elite which knows the law in some field or other, is an object of distrust and resentment.

- Auden, W. H.

The ear tends to be lazy, craves the familiar and is shocked by the unexpected; the eye, on the other hand, tends to be impatient, craves the novel and is bored by repetition.

- Auden, W. H.

My face looks like a wedding-cake left out in the rain.

- Auden, W. H.

Every European visitor to the United States is struck by the comparative rarity of what he

would call a face, by the frequency of men and women who look like elderly babies. If he stays in the States for any length of time, he will learn that this cannot be put down to a lack of sensibility -- the American feels the joys and sufferings of human life as keenly as anybody else. The only plausible explanation I can find lies in his different attitude to the past. To have a face, in the European sense of the word, it would seem that one must not only enjoy and suffer but also desire to preserve the memory of even the most humiliating and unpleasant experiences of the past.

- Auden, W. H.

May it not be that, just as we have to have faith in Him, God has to have faith in us and, considering the history of the human race so far, may it not be that faith is even more difficult for Him than it is for us?

- Auden, W. H.

Fame often makes a writer vain, but seldom makes him proud.

- Auden, W. H.

Between friends differences in taste or opinion are irritating in direct proportion to their triviality.

- Auden, W. H.

No human being is innocent, but there is a class of innocent human actions called Games.

- Auden, W. H.

Geniuses are the luckiest of mortals because what they must do is the same as what they most want to do.

- Auden, W. H.

The Americans are violently oral. That's why in America the mother is all-important and the father has no position at all -- isn't respected in the least. Even the American passion for laxatives can be explained as an oral manifestation. They want to get rid of any unpleasantness taken in through the mouth.

- Auden, W. H.

God bless the USA, so large, so friendly, and so rich.

- Auden, W. H.

God is Love, we are taught as children to believe. But when we first begin to get some inkling of how He loves us, we are repelled; it seems so cold, indeed, not love at all as we understand the word.

- Auden, W. H.

One cannot walk through an assembly factory and not feel that one is in Hell.

- Auden, W. H.

Among those whom I like or admire, I can find no common denominator, but among those

whom I love, I can: all of them make me laugh.

- Auden, W. H.

To the man-in-the-street, who, I'm sorry to say, is a keen observer of life. The word Intellectual suggests straight away. A man who's untrue to his wife.

- Auden, W. H.

What people don't realize is that intimacy has its conventions as well as ordinary social intercourse. There are three cardinal rules -- don't take somebody else's boyfriend unless you've been specifically invited to do so, don't take a drink without being asked, and keep a scrupulous accounting in financial matters.

- Auden, W. H.

It is already possible to imagine a society in which the majority of the population, that is to say, its laborers, will have almost as much leisure as in earlier times was enjoyed by the aristocracy. When one recalls how aristocracies in the past actually behaved, the prospect is not cheerful.

- Auden, W. H.

The actors today really need the whip hand. They're so lazy. They haven't got the sense of pride in their profession that the less socially elevated musical comedy and music hall people or acrobats have. The theater has never been any good since the actors became gentlemen.

- Auden, W. H.

If the most significant characteristic of man is the complex of biological needs he shares with all members of his species, then the best lives for the writer to observe are those in which the role of natural necessity is clearest, namely, the lives of the very poor.

- Auden, W. H.

We must love one another or die.

- Auden, W. H.

We are not commanded (or forbidden) to love our mates, our children, our friends, our country because such affections come naturally to us and are good in themselves, although we may corrupt them. We are commanded to love our neighbor because our natural attitude toward the other is one of either indifference or hostility.

- Auden, W. H.

A false enchantment can all too easily last a lifetime.

- Auden, W. H.

Like everything which is not the involuntary result of fleeting emotion but the creation of time and will, any marriage, happy or unhappy, is infinitely more interesting than any romance, however passionate.

- Auden, W. H.

How happy the lot of the mathematician! He is judged solely by his peers, and the standard is so high that no colleague or rival can ever win a reputation he does not deserve. No cashier writes a letter to the press complaining about the incomprehensibility of Modern Mathematics and comparing it unfavorably with the good old days when mathematicians were content to paper irregularly shaped rooms and fill bathtubs without closing the waste pipe.

- Auden, W. H.

Left to itself the masculine imagination has very little appreciation for the here and now; it prefers to dwell on what is absent, on what has been or may be. If men are more punctual than women, it is because they know that, without the external discipline of clock time, they would never get anything done.

- Auden, W. H.

The masculine imagination lives in a state of perpetual revolt against the limitations of human life. In theological terms, one might say that all men, left to themselves, become gnostics. They may swagger like peacocks, but in their heart of hearts they all think sex an indignity and wish they could beget themselves on themselves. Hence the aggressive hostility toward women so manifest in most club-car stories.

- Auden, W. H.

The center that I cannot find is known to my unconscious mind.

- Auden, W. H.

Murder is unique in that it abolishes the party it injures, so that society has to take the place of the victim and on his behalf demand atonement or grant forgiveness; it is the one crime in which society has a direct interest.

- Auden, W. H.

It's frightening how easy it is to commit murder in America. Just a drink too much. I can see myself doing it. In England, one feels all the social restraints holding one back. But here, anything can happen.

- Auden, W. H.

A verbal art like poetry is reflective; it stops to think. Music is immediate, it goes on to become.

- Auden, W. H.

Proper names are poetry in the raw. Like all poetry they are untranslatable.

- Auden, W. H.

The only way to spend New Year's Eve is either quietly with friends or in a brothel. Otherwise when the evening ends and people pair off, someone is bound to be left in tears.

- Auden, W. H.

No good opera plot can be sensible, for people do not sing when they are feeling sensible.

- Auden, W. H.

If music in general is an imitation of history, opera in particular is an imitation of human willfulness; it is rooted in the fact that we not only have feelings but insist upon having them at whatever cost to ourselves. The quality common to all the great operatic roles, e.g., Don Giovanni, Norma, Lucia, Tristan, Isolde, Brunnhilde, is that each of them is a passionate and willful state of being. In real life they would all be bores, even Don Giovanni.

- Auden, W. H.

Perhaps there is only one cardinal sin: impatience. Because of impatience we were driven out of Paradise, because of impatience we cannot return.

- Auden, W. H.

I cannot accept the doctrine that in poetry there is a suspension of belief. A poet must never make a statement simply because it sounds poetically exciting; he must also believe it to be true.

- Auden, W. H.

It is a sad fact about our culture that a poet can earn much more money writing or talking about his art than he can by practicing it.

- Auden, W. H.

Poetry makes nothing happen. It survives in the valley of its saying.

- Auden, W. H.

Rhymes, meters, stanza forms, etc., are like servants. If the master is fair enough to win their affection and firm enough to command their respect, the result is an orderly happy household. If he is too tyrannical, they give notice; if he lacks authority, they become slovenly, impertinent, drunk and dishonest.

- Auden, W. H.

As a poet there is only one political duty, and that is to defend one's language against corruption. When it is corrupted, people lose faith in what they hear and this leads to violence.

- Auden, W. H.

The belief that politics can be scientific must inevitably produce tyrannies. Politics cannot be a science, because in politics theory and practice cannot be separated, and the sciences depend upon their separation. Empirical politics must be kept in bounds by democratic institutions, which leave it up to the subjects of the experiment to say whether it shall be tried, and to stop it if they dislike it, because, in politics, there is a distinction, unknown to science, between Truth and Justice.

- Auden, W. H.

My deepest feeling about politicians is that they are dangerous lunatics to be avoided when possible and carefully humored; people, above all, to whom one must never tell the truth.

- Auden, W. H.

Every autobiography is concerned with two characters, a Don Quixote, the Ego, and a Sancho Panza, the Self.

- Auden, W. H.

There's only one good test of pornography. Get twelve normal men to read the book, and then ask them, Did you get an erection? If the answer is Yes from a majority of the twelve, then the book is pornographic.

- Auden, W. H.

To pray is to pay attention to something or someone other than oneself. Whenever a man so concentrates his attention -- on a landscape, a poem, a geometrical problem, an idol, or the True God -- that he completely forgets his own ego and desires, he is praying. The primary task of the schoolteacher is to teach children, in a secular context, the technique of prayer.

- Auden, W. H.

You must go to bed with friends or whores, where money makes up the difference in beauty or desire.

- Auden, W. H.

When I am in the company of scientists, I feel like a shabby curate who has strayed by mistake into a drawing room full of dukes.

- Auden, W. H.

You know there are no secrets in America. It's quite different in England, where people think of a secret as a shared relation between two people.

- Auden, W. H.

It is... axiomatic that we should all think of ourselves as being more sensitive than other people because, when we are insensitive in our dealings with others, we cannot be aware of it at the time: conscious insensitivity is a self-contradiction.

- Auden, W. H.

We are here on earth to do good to others. What the others are here for, I don't know.

- Auden, W. H.

You have to see the sex act comically, as a child.

- Auden, W. H.

All sins tend to be addictive, and the terminal point of addiction is damnation.

- Auden, W. H.

Slavery is so intolerable a condition that the slave can hardly escape deluding himself into thinking that he is choosing to obey his master's commands when, in fact, he is obliged to.

Most slaves of habit suffer from this delusion and so do some writers, enslaved by an all

too personal style.

- Auden, W. H.

A man has his distinctive personal scent which his wife, his children and his dog can recognize. A crowd has a generalized stink. The public is odorless.

- Auden, W. H.

Precisely because we do not communicate by singing, a song can be out of place but not out of character; it is just as credible that a stupid person should sing beautifully as that a clever person should do so.

- Auden, W. H.

Of course, behaviorism works. So does torture. Give me a no-nonsense, down-to-earth behaviorist, a few drugs, and simple electrical appliances, and in six months I will have him reciting the Athanasian Creed in public.

- Auden, W. H.

A real book is not one that we read, but one that reads us.

- Auden, W. H.

Some books are undeservedly forgotten; none are undeservedly remembered.

- Auden, W. H.

Nobody knows what the cause is, though some pretend they do; it like some hidden assassin waiting to strike at you. Childless women get it, and men when they retire; it as if there had to be some outlet for their foiled creative fire.

- Auden, W. H.

The countenances of children, like those of animals, are masks, not faces, for they have not yet developed a significant profile of their own.

- Auden, W. H.

It takes little talent to see clearly what lies under one's nose, a good deal of it to know in which direction to point that organ.

- Auden, W. H.

A professor is one who talks in someone else's sleep.

- Auden, W. H.

Drama is based on the Mistake. I think someone is my friend when he really is my enemy, that I am free to marry a woman when in fact she is my mother, that this person is a chambermaid when it is a young nobleman in disguise, that this well-dressed young man is rich when he is really a penniless adventurer, or that if I do this such and such a result will follow when in fact it results in something very different. All good drama has two movements, first the making of the mistake, then the discovery that it was a mistake.

- Auden, W. H.

Dogmatic theological statements are neither logical propositions nor poetic utterances. They are shaggy dog stories; they have a point, but he who tries too hard to get it will miss it.

- Auden, W. H.

Anyone who has a child today should train him to be either a physicist or a ballet dancer. Then he'll escape.

- Auden, W. H.

In order that people may be happy in their work, these three things are needed: They must be fit for it: they must not do too much of it: and they must have a sense of success in it --not a doubtful sense, such as needs some testimony of others for its confirmation, but a sure sense, or rather knowledge, that so much work has been done well, and fruitfully done, whatever the world may say or think about it.

- Auden, W. H.

A tremendous number of people in America work very hard at something that bores them. Even a rich man thinks he has to go down to the office everyday. Not because he likes it but because he can't think of anything else to do.

- Auden, W. H.

Some writers confuse authenticity, which they ought always to aim at, with originality, which they should never bother about.

- Auden, W. H.

No poet or novelist wishes he were the only one who ever lived, but most of them wish they were the only one alive, and quite a number fondly believe their wish has been granted.

- Auden, W. H.

Funeral Blues

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;

Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.

For nothing now can ever come to any good.

- Auden, W. H.

Narcissus does not fall in love with his reflection because it is beautiful, but because it is his. If it were his beauty that enthralled him, he would be set free in a few years by its fading.

- Auden, W. H.

Literary confessors are contemptible, like beggars who exhibit their sores for money, but not so contemptible as the public that buys their books.

- Auden, W. H.

Healing, Papa would tell me, is not a science, but the intuitive art of wooing nature.

- Auden, W. H.

All works of art are commissioned in the sense that no artist can create one by a simple act of will but must wait until what he believes to be a good idea for a work comes to him.

- Auden, W. H.

The critical opinions of a writer should always be taken with a large grain of salt. For the most part, they are manifestations of his debate with himself as to what he should do next and what he should avoid.

- Auden, W. H.

Criticism should be a casual conversation.

- Auden, W. H.

The words of a dead man are modified in the guts of the living.

- Auden, W. H.

Eagerly, musician, Sweep your string, So we may sing, Elated, optative, Our several
voices Interblending, Playfully contending, Not interfering But co-inhering, For all within The
cincture of the sound's holy ground, Where all are Brothers, None faceless Others. Let
mortals beware Of words, for With words we lie, Can say peace When we mean war, Foul
thought speak fair And promise falsely, But song is true: Let music for peace Be the
paradigm, For peace means to change At the right time, As the World-Clock, Goes Tick and
Tock. So may the story Of our human city Presently move Like music, when Begotten
notes New notes beget, Making the flowing Of time a growing, Till what it could be, At last it
is, Where even sadness Is a form of gladness, Where Fate is Freedom, Grace and Surprise.

- Auden, W. H.



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