

H. L. Mencken

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Henry Louis Mencken

(September 12, 1880 – January 29, 1956), better known as **H. L. Mencken**, was a twentieth-century journalist, satirist, social critic, cynic, and freethinker, known as the "Sage of Baltimore." He is often

regarded as one of the most influential American writers of the early 20th century.



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Life

Mencken was born in Baltimore, Maryland, the son of August Mencken, a cigar factory owner of German extraction. Having moved into the new family home at 1524 Hollins Street (in the Union Square neighborhood) when he was three years old, he lived in the house for the rest of his life, apart from five years of married life. He became a reporter for the *Baltimore Morning Herald* in 1899 and moved to *The Baltimore Sun* in 1906. At this time, he had also begun writing editorial columns that demonstrated the author he would soon become. On the side, he wrote short stories, a

novel, and even poetry (which he later reviled). In 1908, he became a literary critic for the magazine *The Smart Set*. Together with George Jean Nathan, Mencken founded and edited *The American Mercury*, published by Alfred A. Knopf, in January 1924. It soon had a national circulation and became highly influential on college campuses across America.

Mencken is perhaps best remembered today for *The American Language*, a multi-volume study of how the English language is spoken in the United States, and his satirical reporting on the prosecution, judge, jury, and venue of the Scopes trial, which he is credited for naming the "Monkey" trial.

Among Mencken's influences were Rudyard Kipling, Ambrose Bierce, Friedrich Nietzsche, Joseph Conrad, and especially Mark Twain.

In his capacity as editor and "man of ideas" Mencken became close friends with the leading literary figures of his time, including Theodore Dreiser, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Alfred Knopf, as well as a mentor to several young reporters, including Alistair Cooke. He also championed artists whose works he considered worthy. For

example, he asserted that books such as *Caught Short! A Saga of Wailing Wall Street* (1929), “by” Eddie Cantor (ghost written by David Freedman) did more to pull America out of The Depression than all government measures combined. He also mentored John Fante.

As a nationally syndicated columnist and author of numerous books he notably attacked fundamentalist Christianity and the "Booboisie," his word for the ignorant middle classes. In 1926, he was arrested for selling an issue of *The American Mercury* banned in Boston.^[1] Mencken heaped scorn not only upon some public officials but the contemporary state of American democracy itself: in 1931, the Arkansas legislature passed a motion to pray for Mencken's soul after he had called the state the "apex of moronia."

Mencken sometimes took positions in his essays more for shock value than for deep-seated conviction, such as his essay arguing that the Anglo-Saxon race was demonstrably the most cowardly in human history, published at a time when much of his readership considered Anglo-Saxons the noble pinnacle of civilization.

Mencken married Sara Haardt, an Alabama writer

and professor 18 years his junior, in 1930. Haardt was a professor of English at Goucher College in Baltimore who wrote short stories and had led efforts in Alabama to ratify the 19th Amendment [2]. The two met in 1923 after Mencken delivered a lecture at the college. Mencken promoted her short stories, and a seven-year courtship ensued^[3]. The marriage made national headlines, and many were surprised that Mencken, who once called marriage "the end of hope," had gone to the altar. "The Holy Spirit informed and inspired me," Mencken said. "Like all other infidels, I am superstitious and always follow hunches: this one seemed to be a superb one." [4] Haardt was in poor health throughout their marriage, and died in 1935 of meningitis. Mencken later published *Southern Album*, a posthumous collection of her short stories.

Mencken suffered a cerebral thrombosis in 1948, from which he never fully recovered. The damage to his brain left him aware and fully conscious but unable to read or write. In his later years he enjoyed listening to classical music and talking with friends, but he sometimes referred to himself in the past tense as if already dead.

Mencken was, in fact, preoccupied with how he

would be perceived after his death, and he spent this period of time organizing his papers, letters, newspaper clippings and columns. His personal materials were released in 1971, 1981, and 1991 (starting 15 years after his death), and were so thorough they even included grade-school report cards. Hundreds of thousands of letters were included - the only omissions were strictly personal letters received from women.

He died in 1956 at the age of seventy-five, and was interred in the Loudon Park Cemetery in Baltimore, Maryland. His epitaph reads:

*If, after I depart this vale, you ever
remember me and have thought to please my
ghost, forgive some sinner, and wink your
eye at some homely girl.*

Mencken suggested this epitaph in *The Smart Set*. After his death, it was inscribed on a plaque in the lobby of *The Baltimore Sun*.

Mencken's papers as well as much of his library, which includes many books inscribed by major authors, are in the collections of the Enoch Pratt Free Library, in Baltimore. Some of the items are displayed in a special room in the 2003 wing of the

library, the Mencken Room.

Style

Perhaps Mencken's most important contribution to American letters is his satirical style. Mencken, influenced heavily by Mark Twain and Jonathan Swift, believed the lampoon was more powerful than the lament; his hilariously overwrought indictments of nearly every subject (and more than a couple that were unmentionable at the time) are certainly worth reading as examples of fine craftsmanship.

The Mencken style influenced many writers; American author Richard Wright described the power of Mencken's technique (his exposure to Mencken would inspire him to become a writer himself). In his autobiographical *Black Boy*, Wright recalls his reaction to *A Book of Prefaces* and one of the volumes of the *Prejudices* series:

I was jarred and shocked by the clear, clean, sweeping sentences ... Why did he write like that? I pictured the man as a raging demon, slashing with his pen ... denouncing everything American ... laughing ... mocking God, authority ... This man was fighting,

fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club ... I read on and what amazed me was not what he said, but how on earth anybody had the courage to say it. (Quoted from Scruggs, pg. 1)

Mencken was at the top of his game in the 1920s, when a backlash against WWI-era superpatriotism and government expansion (exemplified in the Palmer Raids) produced many overtly anti-American protests by literati, among whom Mencken was arguably the most pugnacious. The "anti-American" label is an epithet today (and to a lesser degree in Mencken's time); the term is not used here to defame HLM. He would have delighted in being called "anti-American"; his contrarian spirit and envy of more cultured states (Germany especially) compelled him to mount unapologetically scathing attacks on nearly all aspects of American culture.

In his classic essay "On Being an American" (published in his *Prejudices: Third Series*), Mencken fires a salvo at American myths. The following choice quote displays his amusing take on why the United States is the "Land of Opportunity", and segues into a laundry-list of

national pathologies as he sees them:

Here the business of getting a living ... is enormously easier than it is in any other Christian land—so easy, in fact, that an educated and forehanded man who fails at it must actually make deliberate efforts to that end. Here the general average of intelligence, of knowledge, of competence, of integrity, of self-respect, of honor is so low that any man who knows his trade, does not fear ghosts, has read fifty good books, and practices the common decencies stands out as brilliantly as a wart on a bald head, and is thrown willy-nilly into a meager and exclusive aristocracy. And here, more than anywhere else I know of or have heard of, the daily panorama of human existence, of private and communal folly—the unending procession of governmental extortions and chicaneries, of commercial brigandages and throat-slittings, of theological buffooneries, of aesthetic ribaldries, of legal swindles and harlotries, of miscellaneous rogueries, villainies, imbecilities, grotesqueries and extravagances—is so inordinately gross and preposterous, so perfectly brought up to the highest conceivable amperage, so steadily enriched with an almost fabulous daring and

originality, that only the man who was born with a petrified diaphragm can fail to laugh himself to sleep every night, and to awake every morning with all the eager, unflagging expectation of a Sunday-school superintendent touring the Paris peep-shows.

Whether the reader agrees with Mencken or finds him infuriatingly coarse and incorrect, all can observe his technique with profit; it is rare in contemporary discourse. The criticisms he poses are nearly the same as those of famous literary expatriates including Richard Wright, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald; the injustices (or at least incongruities) are the same ones fought by period Muckraker journalists such as Lincoln Steffens and Ida Tarbell. However, instead of decrying the "daily panorama of human existence, of private and communal folly" and calling for reform or improvement, Mencken says he is "entertained" by them. On its face, this approach displays a crass indifference and total lack of compassion; Mencken admitted as much, as it was part of his personal philosophy: a kind of fierce libertarianism inspired by a Nietzschean contempt for the "improvers of mankind", a social Darwinist outlook derived from Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner, and a "Tory" elitism.

The power of satire comes from the transformation of enemies and villains into a source of entertainment; they are reduced from powerful people to be contended with into farcical creatures deserving of mockery. Black journalist and Mencken contemporary James Weldon Johnson celebrated this technique as a way of fighting racism without stooping to the level of Jim Crow enforcers and the Ku Klux Klan:

Mr. Mencken's favorite method of showing people the truth is to attack falsehood with ridicule. He shatters the walls of foolish pride and prejudice and hypocrisy merely by laughing at them; and he is more effective against them than most writers who hurl heavily loaded shells of protest and imprecation.

What could be more disconcerting and overwhelming to a man posing as everybody's superior than to find that everybody was laughing at his pretensions? Protest would only swell up his self-importance. (quoted from Scruggs, pg. 57)

Mencken, in "On Being an American" called the

United States "... incomparably the best show on Earth..."; he clearly took joy in covering religious controversies, political conventions, and unearthing new "quackeries" (among his favorite targets are the Baptist and Methodist churches, Christian Science, Chiropractics, and most of all, Puritanism, which he defined as "the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, might be happy").

Although he attacked every President of the United States who served during the years of his career as a writer and critic, from Taft to Truman, Mencken reserved a special ire for his attacks on Woodrow Wilson, whose administration he saw as epitomizing the moralistic, Puritanical impulses of American life. Mencken's snipes at Wilson resulted in Mencken being singled out by the Bureau of Investigation (the predecessor of the FBI) and other law enforcement agencies as a potential subversive during Wilson's administration.

It is no coincidence he regarded *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to be the finest work of American literature; much of that book details episodes of gullible and ignorant people being swindled by Confidence Men like the (deliberately) pathetic "Duke" and "Dauphin" roustabouts with whom Huck and Jim travel down the Mississippi River. These scam-artists swindle

country "boobs" (as Mencken referred to them); by posing as enlightened speakers on temperance (to obtain the funds to get roaring drunk), pious "saved" men seeking funds for far off evangelistic missions (to pirates on the high seas, no less), and learned doctors of phrenology (who can barely spell). The book can be read as a story of America's hilarious dark side, a place where democracy, as defined by Mencken, is "... the worship of Jackals by Jackasses."

One of the disadvantages of slashing satire is that it does only that: slash. Alfred Kazin called Mencken's criticisms impotent since "Every Babbitt read him gleefully and pronounced his neighbor a Babbitt" -- they permitted a circular firing squad of self-righteous viciousness. ("Babbitt" is a now-rare epithet derived from the Sinclair Lewis book of the same name; it can be loosely defined as an uncultured, "square", typically middle-aged and middle-class businessman characterized by timidity and ignorance of their philistinism. It is a very similar concept to the more commonly used German terms *Spießser* and *Spießbürger*.) Critics must walk a thin line between declaring "The Emperor has no clothes" (a fine service to all), and going too far by furiously tearing the clothes off of undeserving

bystanders. Mencken tended to go too far as matter-of-course; consequently he was the first to say what needed to be said in his criticisms of lynching, World War I-era civil liberties abuses, and especially the dismally moral and philistine American arts. On the other hand, this extremism left him with a body of work filled with unsubtle reviews of the subtle and scores of openly vicious statements about all ethnicities.

This viciousness was summed up in the play *Inherit the Wind*, a fictionalized version of the Scopes Monkey Trial. As the story ends, the protagonist tells Hornbeck (the character representing Mencken):

*You never push a noun against a verb
without trying to blow up something.*

In a 26 July 1920 article in the *Baltimore Evening Sun*, Mencken wrote about the difficulties of good men reaching national office when such campaigns must necessarily be conducted remotely:

The larger the mob, the harder the test. In small areas, before small electorates, a first-rate man occasionally fights his way through, carrying even the mob with him by

force of his personality. But when the field is nationwide, and the fight must be waged chiefly at second and third hand, and the force of personality cannot so readily make itself felt, then all the odds are on the man who is, intrinsically, the most devious and mediocre — the man who can most easily adeptly disperse the notion that his mind is a virtual vacuum.

The Presidency tends, year by year, to go to such men. As democracy is perfected, the office represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. We move toward a lofty ideal. On some great and glorious day the plain folks of the land will reach their heart's desire at last, and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron.

Mencken's paper published his "secret diary" in 1989, kept sealed for 25 years after his death in 1956, on his instructions. According to an item in the South Bay (California) *Daily Breeze* [1] on December 5, 1989, titled "Mencken's Secret Diary Shows Racist Leanings," Mencken's views shocked even the "sympathetic scholar who edited it," Charles A. Fecher of Baltimore. There was a club in Baltimore called the Maryland Club which had one Jewish member, and that member died.

Mencken said "There is no other Jew in Baltimore who seems suitable," according to the article. And the diary quoted him as saying of blacks, in 1943, "...it is impossible to talk anything resembling discretion or judgment to a colored woman..." *The Diary of H. L. Mencken* was published by Alfred A. Knopf.

Elitism

Instead of arguing that one race or group was superior to another, Mencken believed that every community— whether the community of train porters, African-Americans, newspapermen, or artists — produced a few people of clear superiority. He considered groupings on a par with hierarchies, which led to a kind of natural elitism and aristocracy. "Superior" individuals, in Mencken's view, were those wrongly oppressed and disdained by their own communities, but nevertheless distinguished by their will and personal achievement—not by race or birth. Of course, based on his heritage, achievement, and work ethic, Mencken considered himself a member of this group.

Mencken's *The Negro as Author* began as a

straightforward critique of a fictional work of a black author writing with racial themes as a focus:

The Shadow, by Mary White Ovington, is a bad novel, but it is interesting as a first attempt by a colored writer to plunge into fiction in the grand manner.

In fact Mary White Ovington was not "colored," as Mencken conveniently pretends not to know. He instead uses this omission as a means to single out her work as an example of sympathetic, liberal-esque anti-racist activism (among educated whites) which in the end only turned out bad writing that undercut the public image of genuine emerging black authors. Within this humorous context, Mencken then commented positively on the future of black writing:

The thing we need is a realistic picture of this inner life of the negro by one who sees the race from within--a self portrait as vivid and accurate as Dostoyevsky's portrait of the Russian or Thackeray's of the Englishman. The action should be kept within the normal range of negro experience. it should extend over a long enough range of years to show some development in character and circumstance. It should be presented against a background

made vivid by innumerable small details.

Mencken, in his legendary salvo against Southern American culture, "The Sahara of the Bozart" ("Bozart" being a mock misspelling of "Beaux-Arts"), argued that the whole Confederate region fell into cultureless savagery and backwardness after the Civil War— with the exception of the African-American community. In what was an audacious (and seriously intended) argument, Mencken claimed Southern blacks were actually the heirs and descendants of the talented aristocrats— by way of African-American mistresses of Caucasian men. Further Mencken opined that this community was the only site of cultural vitality or activity whatsoever, in spite of being hindered by the barbaric oppression of a culture that condoned and enforced Jim Crow laws and still tacitly sanctioned lynching.

The most authoritative work on this subject is Charles Scruggs' book, *The Sage in Harlem* — a survey of Mencken's influence on and support of African-American intellectuals. Mencken, as the editor and main creative force behind *The American Mercury* magazine, was responsible for publishing more black authors than any other publication of its stature —certainly more than any

other white dominated publication. The articles by African-Americans ranged from a Pullman Porter's account of life in that occupation to sophisticated articles by important black thinkers.

Democracy

Mencken's views on democracy were well-known by his familiar readers. Rather than simply dismissing democracy as a popular fallacy (like Nietzsche, for example) or treating it with open contempt, Mencken's response to it was a publicized sense of amusement.

His feelings on this subject (like his casual feelings on many other such subjects) are sprinkled throughout his writings over the years, very occasionally taking center-stage with the full force of Mencken's prose:

[D]emocracy gives [the beatification of mediocrity] a certain appearance of objective and demonstrable truth. The mob man, functioning as citizen, gets a feeling that he is really important to the world - that he is genuinely running things. Out of his maudlin herding after rogues and mountebanks there comes to him a sense of vast and mysterious

power—which is what makes archbishops, police sergeants, the grand goblins of the Ku Klux and other such magnificoes happy. And out of it there comes, too, a conviction that he is somehow wise, that his views are taken seriously by his betters - which is what makes United States Senators, fortune tellers and Young Intellectuals happy. Finally, there comes out of it a glowing consciousness of a high duty triumphantly done which is what makes hangmen and husbands happy.

This sentiment[2] is, of course, fairly consistent with Mencken's distaste for common notions and the philosophical outlook he unabashedly set down throughout his life as a writer (drawing on Friedrich Nietzsche and Herbert Spencer, among others).

Also, much of Mencken's enthusiasm for Kaiser Wilhelm's Germany was based upon that nation's inward autocracy, despite a nominally representative system.

Perceived racial issues

Most commentators regard his views as libertarian - yet some of Mencken's writing displays elitism,

and contemporaneously fashionable Social Darwinist thinking. In addition to these allegations, Mencken has been referred to as anti-Semitic and misogynistic. In a letter to Upton Sinclair published in the American Mercury, Mencken described Hitler as "hardly more than a common Ku Kluxer"^[5] (which, given his disgust with the Ku Klux Klan, is a rather nasty insult). Another allegation levelled against him was that he was frequently obsessed with the importance of social status or class. For example, Mencken broke off a relationship of many years with his lover, Marion Bloom, when they were arranging to be married. Critics saw this as being due to Bloom being insufficiently wealthy, upper-class, and sophisticated for him. Mencken, however, claimed he ended the relationship because she converted to Christian Science.

While Mencken's essays are sprinkled liberally with racial epithets ("blackamoor," "niggero," "coon," "prehensile kikes,") Mencken considered the African-American intellectual George Schuyler to be a life-long friend — rare in any case, considering Mencken's infamous capacity for personal criticism. On the other hand, while Mencken was fair to individuals, he was deeply negative in regard to social groups and other

groupings of people, and ethnic groups were no exception. Writing an introduction to *The Antichrist* by Nietzsche, Mencken displays sentiments which some have characterized "indisputably anti-semitic"[6]:

On the Continent, the day is saved by the fact that the plutocracy tends to become more and more Jewish. Here the intellectual cynicism of the Jew almost counterbalances his social unpleasantness. If he is destined to lead the plutocracy of the world out of Little Bethel he will fail, of course, to turn it into an aristocracy--i. e., a caste of gentlemen--, but he will at least make it clever, and hence worthy of consideration. The case against the Jews is long and damning; it would justify ten thousand times as many pogroms as now go on in the world. But whenever you find a *Dauidsbündlerschaft* making practise against the Philistines, there you will find a Jew laying on. Maybe it was this fact that caused Nietzsche to speak up for the children of Israel quite as often as he spoke against them. He was not blind to their faults, but when he set them beside Christians he could not deny their general superiority. Perhaps in America and England, as on the Continent, the increasing Jewishness of the plutocracy, while cutting it

off from all chance of ever developing into an aristocracy, will yet lift it to such a dignity that it will at least deserve a certain grudging respect.^[7]

H.L. Mencken House

Mencken's home at 1524 Hollins Street in Baltimore's Union Square neighborhood was bequeathed to the University of Maryland, Baltimore on the death of Mencken's younger brother August in 1967. The City of Baltimore acquired the property in 1983 and the "H. L. Mencken House" became part of the City Life Museums. The house has been closed to general admission since 1997, but is opened for special events and group visits by arrangement.

The H. L. Mencken Room & Collection

The H. L. Mencken Room and Collection is located at the Central branch of the Enoch Pratt Free Library on Cathedral Street in Baltimore.

Shortly after World War II, Mencken expressed his intention of bequeathing his books and papers to

the Pratt Library. At the time of his death in 1956, most of the present large collection had been received by the Library and a special room on the third floor was being prepared to house the collection suitably. The Mencken Room was dedicated on April 17, 1956.

The collection contains Mencken's typescripts, his newspaper and magazine contributions, his published books, family documents and memorabilia, personal clipping books, a large collection of presentation volumes, a file of correspondence with prominent Marylanders, and the research material used in preparing *The American Language*.

There are additional collections of Menckeniana at Dartmouth College, Harvard University, Princeton University, and Yale University. The Sara Haardt Mencken collection is held at Goucher College. The New York Public Library has collections of Mencken's vast literary correspondence.

Works

- *George Bernard Shaw: His Plays* (1905)
- *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1907)

- *The Artist: A Drama Without Words* (1912)
- *A Book of Burlesques* (1916)
- *A Little Book in C Major* (1916)
- *The Creed of a Novelist* (1916)
- *Pistols for Two* (1917)
- *A Book of Prefaces* (1917)
- *In Defense of Women* (1917)
- *Damn! A Book of Calumny* (1918)
- *The American Language* (1919)
- Prejudices (1919–27)
 - *First Series* (1919)
 - *Second Series* (1920)
 - *Third Series* (1922)
 - *Fourth Series* (1924)
 - *Fifth Series* (1926)
 - *Sixth Series* (1927)
 - *Selected Prejudices* (1927)
 - *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (1922)
- *The Hills of Zion* (1925)
- *Notes on Democracy* (1926)
- *Libido for the Ugly* (1927)
- *Menckeneana: A Schimpflexikon* (ed) (1928)
- *On Politics: A Carnival of Buncombe* (1920–1936)
- *Treatise on the Gods* (1930)
- *Making a President* (1932)
- *Treatise on Right and Wrong* (1934)
- *Happy Days, 1880–1892* (1940)
- *Newspaper Days, 1899–1906* (1941)

- *Heathen Days, 1890–1936* (1943)
- *A Religious Orgy in Tennessee A Reporter's Account of the Scopes Monkey Trial* (2007)

See also

- Bathtub hoax

Further reading

- Marion Elizabeth Rodgers, *Mencken: The American Iconoclast*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press (2005) ISBN 0-19-507238-3
- Terry Teachout, *The Skeptic : A Life of H. L. Mencken*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers (2002) ISBN 0-06-050528-1
- Fred Hobson, *Mencken, A Life*. New York: Random House (1994) ISBN 0-8018-5238-2
Also published as paperback. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press (1995)

References

1. ^ <http://www.massmoments.org/moment.cfm?mid=104>
2. ^ <http://www.al.com/south/literary3.html>
3. ^

4. [^] <http://www.lewrockwell.com/jarvis/jarvis45.html>
5. [^] From the June, 1936 issue of *The American Mercury* ("You protest, and with justice, each time Hitler jails an opponent; but you forget that Stalin and company have jailed and murdered a thousand times as many. It seems to me, and indeed the evidence is plain, that compared to the Moscow brigands and assassins, Hitler is hardly more than a common Ku Kluxer and Mussolini almost a philanthropist.")
6. [^] <http://www.seesharppress.com/nietzscheintro.html>
Accessed 7 June 2007.
7. [^] Nietzsche, F. *The Antichrist*. Trans. and edited by HL Mencken. From the editor's introduction.

External links

- Works by H. L. Mencken at Project Gutenberg
- The Mencken Society
- Friends of the H. L. Mencken House
- The H. L. Mencken Page
- Union Square Online
- H.L. Mencken versus Ambrose Bierce
- H. L. Mencken's Legacy - cigaraficionado.com
- Mencken's columns on the Scopes Trial -

positiveatheism.org

- 1989 Audio Interview with Charles Fecher about H.L. Mencken - RealAudio
- Inside Job - novella by Connie Willis in which the spirit of H. L. Mencken may (or may not) be possessing a fraudulent "channeler".
- Find-A-Grave profile for H. L. Mencken

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"http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H._L._Mencken"

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