

A Mencken Chrestomathy Study Guide

A Mencken Chrestomathy by H. L. Mencken

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Contents

A Mencken Chrestomathy Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter 1, Homo Sapiens, Chapter 2, Types of Men.....	5
Chapter 3, Women, Chapter 4, Religion.....	6
Chapter 5, Morals, Chapter 6, Crime and Punishment.....	8
Chapter 7, Death, Chapter 8, Government.....	9
Chapter 9, Democracy, Chapter 10, Americans.....	10
Chapter 11, The South, Chapter 12, History.....	11
Chapter 13, Statesmen, Chapter 14, American Immortals.....	12
Chapter 15, Odd Fish, Chapter 16, Economics.....	14
Chapter 17, Pedagogy, Chapter 18, Psychology.....	15
Chapter 19, Science, Chapter 20, Quackery.....	16
Chapter 21, The Human Body, Chapter 22, Utopian Flights.....	17
Chapter 23, Souvenirs of a Journalist, Chapter 24, Criticism.....	18
Chapter 25, Literature, Chapter 26, Literati.....	19
Chapter 27, Music, Chapter 28, The Lesser Arts.....	20
Chapter 29, Buffooneries, Chapter 30, Sententiae, Chapter 31, Appendix.....	21
Characters.....	22
Objects/Places.....	25
Themes.....	27
Style.....	29
Quotes.....	31
Topics for Discussion.....	33



Plot Summary

A Mencken Chrestomathy is a compilation of the writings of Henry Louis Mencken, from his own selection of his best work. H. L. Mencken (1880-1956) grew up, lived and died in Baltimore, Maryland. His parents were August and Anna Mencken and he grew up with a private education, afterward attending Baltimore Polytechnic. Mencken married in 1930, his wife, Sara Powell Haardt, died in 1935.

Mencken started a job as a reporter for the Baltimore Morning Herald in 1899 and quickly rose to become city editor in 1903; by 1905, he had shot up to city editor for the Evening Herald. Between 1906 and 1910, he worked for the Baltimore Sun and from 1910 to 1917 for the Evening Sun. After a three year hiatus, Mencken returned to his job at the Evening Sun in 1920 and would work there until 1935. Mencken never stopped associating with the Sun papers and helped direct their publishing company, the A. S. Abell Co. In 1908, Mencken began to edit the Smart Set and shared the editorship between 1914 and 1923. He and his co-editor, George Jean Nathan, created The American Mercury in 1924, and Mencken was its editor for the next nine years.

During his thirty-four years in journalism and editing, H. L. Mencken became one of the nation's most famous popular writers in part because of his acerbic wit, excellent writing, clever aphorisms and his ability to skewer great men with ease. That his fame was justified will become immediately apparent to any reader of A Mencken Chrestomathy. The book is a cross-section of Mencken's writings on many topics, all of which, in Mencken's words, contains a bit of "ribaldry" because they are often comic, even when the issue is serious. Mencken refuses to apologize for this.

The book has thirty chapters and each of the chapters contain essays; some chapters are short, containing two to four essays, others are much longer, with twenty or more pieces drawn together. The chapters range over particular subject matters, and they appear to be arranged in some reasonable order.

Chapter 1, Homo Sapiens, contains Mencken's thoughts on human nature and Chapter 2 outlines Mencken's analysis of types of men. In Chapter 3, Mencken turns to his thoughts on women, and Chapter 4 has Mencken discuss religion. Chapters 5 and 6 cover morals and crime and punishment respectively, while Chapter 7 touches on death. In Chapter 8, Mencken skewers government and its nature, whereas in Chapter 9, he does the same to democracy. Chapter 10 cuts loose in attacks on the American people and Chapter 11 focuses on doutherners, among Mencken's favorite whipping boys.

Chapter 12 covers history, 13, American statesmen, 14, other American "Immortals", and 15 tells the story of various unusual but often unknown men. The next five chapters cover fields of study, including economics, teaching, psychology and science generally; these are followed with a chapter on "quackery". Chapter 21 takes the reader through Mencken's reflections on the human body, and Chapter 22 covers pieces of 'utopian flights'.

Chapter 23 contains some of Mencken's best works of journalism, such as his coverage of the Scopes Monkey Trial, whereas Chapter 24, 25 and 26 review literary criticism, literature and the literati. Chapter 27 discusses music, Chapter 28 the 'lesser' arts. Chapter 29 contains Mencken's silliest essays and Chapter 30 contains his various apothegms and aphorisms. Chapter 31 is a brief appendix.



Chapter 1, Homo Sapiens, Chapter 2, Types of Men

Chapter 1, Homo Sapiens, Chapter 2, Types of Men Summary and Analysis

Mencken's works cover many topics, and here Mencken has compiled his various thoughts according to various subjects. The subjects have a sort of order which appropriately begin with Mencken's thoughts on the nature of man. Mencken affirmed in the late 1910s and early 20s the view of the modern scientist. Man is not the center of the universe. Rather, he is the product of random, incomprehensible and ultimately meaningless processes.

Mencken thinks it is appropriate that man be dethroned in this way, as he is full of errors and is prone to believe all sorts of ridiculous things. Further, many animals have faculties superior to his and their faculties seem to run them into less trouble than the faculty that makes man unique, his imagination. If one thinks that man was created by God, one must inevitably ascribe to God fault for all the errors of man or suppose that God himself possesses those same errors.

It will not do to say that man has a soul and so he is unique and like God. It has utterly failed as a device intended to make us more like him. Our capacity for abstract thought has aided us in some ways, but again, hurt us in others. But man is still full of delusion, always thinking the future will be better than the path, refusing to believe the truth when it stares him in the face, and so on.

Chapter 2 covers the various types of man, which range over many types, from the romantic to the physician, to the metaphysician, the relative to the altruist, the good man to the slave, etc. Mencken makes characteristically smart comments about them all. The romantic inevitably exaggerates, the believer maintains a pathological belief in the improbable, the metaphysician always demands to know what you mean, even when it is obvious. The altruist is motivated partly by being uncomfortable with people being unhappy around you. The good man always lacks something essential to being a true human being; Mencken says he has never met a truly moral man that was honorable.



Chapter 3, Women, Chapter 4, Religion

Chapter 3, Women, Chapter 4, Religion Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 3, Mencken discusses his notoriously misogynistic thoughts on women. He thinks that most women pretend to respect their husbands but secretly think of them as asses and pity them. She may envy some of her husbands' traits, but she does not envy him as a whole. The male characters in female novels are always "boobs" deep down. Women do not really lack intelligence, just the ability to master the little mechanical tricks that men ably pick up. These are child's play according to women's social abilities, and women score these male abilities anyway.

But Mencken also views women as relatively uncivilized, as drawn into puerile repressions and inhibitions. They submit and prosper under the civilization of men but they do civilize the great men, who would otherwise have been barbarians. They control their emotions better, but this only further illustrates their incivility. In fact, that women can conceal emotion leads many to see them as cold, but few women are cold, and are in fact capable of the appropriate emotion. Men unaware of this are at a disadvantage.

Mencken denies that monogamy is kept together primarily by ethical considerations. Instead, marriage works because it reduces the alarm and fear of passion. It kills passion and passion is dangerous. The civilized man never sacrifices common security to passion and so he needs marriage. If the moral causes of marriage were successful, young men would be drained of passion and turned into old men, which Mencken calls "the ideal citizen of Christendom."

Men are more civilized today than women often think. The wife can usually hold a man to his promises in one way or another. Men are weak in the face of passion, but conscience often gets in the way. Men are drawn to beauty, but these men are viewed with suspicion, and the pretty man is hated because women care less for beauty than men do. Beauty also often produces bad character.

The allure that women have to men is dangerous and fascinating; it gives men's lives meaning and, while avoiding the game of love is disgusting, playing it brings suffering. After all, few men gain net value from marriage; it has terrible disadvantages for men, and many advantages for women. Women gain it through manipulation. Whatever the man wants, he could get elsewhere and must always accept things he hates along with things he wants. Mencken is critical of romantic love because it leads to such bonds. He sees it as a farce and believes that women destroy the ambitions of men because these ambitions threaten their stability.

Mencken goes on to make various other observations about women, such as that Christianity both treated women as equals but led medieval popes to denigrate them for various political advantages. He praises the prostitute as "the Lady of Joy".



Chapter 4 concerns religion. Mencken strongly rejects the argument from design and believes that the universe is run by many gods, or a 'cosmic secretariat'. He thinks that the Christian belief that God cannot cause a man net evil is absurd and only survives because it is supported by a Jewish weakness for poetry. He sees priests as full of false assumptions and sees the original Christians as modern Holy Rollers, without taste or imagination, and as vulgar cads. He discusses what he sees as the collapse of Protestantism, with the high Protestants going higher and the low Protestants going lower, with few sensible, modest men left in the middle.

Mencken thinks it is absurd that all religious positions should be respected and that God's failures and cruelties should not be forgotten, if He exists. Mencken realizes the doctrine of free will is essential to Christianity but thinks that science has refuted it. He finds the immortality of the soul absurd and thinks that miracles almost certainly have more plausible natural explanations. Mencken reviews a book, "The Powers of the Air" by an English priest, who tries to reconcile Christianity and science, but Mencken thinks the book laughably fails to accomplish its task.



Chapter 5, Morals, Chapter 6, Crime and Punishment

Chapter 5, Morals, Chapter 6, Crime and Punishment Summary and Analysis

Children are born without a sense of right and wrong; instead, it is imposed upon them by society. Morality seems necessary, although the ideas of evil and sin seem made up. Morality probably arose during evolution from social practices required to survive. The moral sense seems to be universal and differences between moral systems seems small. Morality, however, has accretion and growth, with new moral ideas coming into being, such as Christian morality. But Christian morality has also changed, such as in its attitude towards wealth. Next Mencken comments on the difficulties free will debates pose for morality and Christian theology. Mencken also affirms that few men are virtuous and that few men are honorable.

Mencken turns to the criminal law; he regards crime as primarily a legal idea, having little existence beyond it. Punishment is often hypocritical and dishonest, working under made-up purposes by people who think of themselves as too dignified to think of it as a mere incentivizing device. Mencken then covers the morality of judges and the death penalty, and argues that punishment is about more than deterrence. He defends public hanging and analyzes the behavior of cops.



Chapter 7, Death, Chapter 8, Government

Chapter 7, Death, Chapter 8, Government Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 7, Mencken opens with a discussion of suicide, which he often sees as rooted in the notion that death is very painful, when in fact it usually is not. He then discusses objections to suicide. On the report of a suicide, he comments that nothing is mysterious about it. Reflective and skeptical men even have a reason to stay alive, for the sense of humor of life. Mencken notes that there are few books written about human death itself and calls out to America's poets to write a funeral service for those that are obviously damned.

Government, to Mencken's mind, is always a conspiracy against superior men. All governments do this and few governments are preferable to others. Most average men understand that governments are lying to him and the government is usually antagonistic to his interests. Governments cannot be punished either, since they are in control.

Mencken notes that after criticizing politicians for decades, he wonders if he expects too much of them. People are awful by nature; why should public office not corrupt them? Many politicians are, privately, charming individuals. But they will not share their wisdom on the stump or tell the people the truth. Instead, they will promise what they cannot deliver. Mencken notes that political theorists often try to dignify the political order of their day.



Chapter 9, Democracy, Chapter 10, Americans

Chapter 9, Democracy, Chapter 10, Americans Summary and Analysis

Before democracy came fully into the world, people thought it was a practically heavenly form of government. It was the dream of sentimentalists. But early democratic people simply wanted concrete material gains, and cared little for the virtue of his class. But as time progressed, the mob has adopted the moral attitude of the metaphysician. This attitude has resulted in the belief that the people have a right to govern themselves and that they are competent to do it. The problem is that they are not competent.

Perhaps democracy is a self-limiting disease, like civilization. In other words, it may limit its own corrupting effects and resist other corruptions. Mencken explains the way in which it ruins greatness and individuality, but that there is a striving in democratic man for good. The problem is that it rarely manifests itself. America needs a party of liberty.

Democracy often produces men who are full of memory and nostalgic; they are largely depressing. These men yearn for freedom but never achieve it. Mencken then engages in some Freudian analysis of the attitude. He explains his disdain for democratic political theory as due to his inability to envy others. Democracy runs on envy, in his view. Mencken also argues that democracy forces those who promote the welfare of the people to degrade themselves in front of the men they serve. Although, it is a charming form of government because it is interesting.

Mencken then turns to his thoughts on the American people, beginning with the Anglo-Saxon. He thinks the Anglo-Saxon has many good qualities but he celebrates himself too much; this probably results from an inferiority complex. Anglo-Saxons expect their station in life to constantly improve. He finds them superstitious and Mencken is surprised that he is an Anglo-Saxon of fairly pure blood. In groups, the Anglo-Saxon is the least civilized of white men and the least capable of civilization.

The culture of the United States is defective because it lacks a civilized aristocracy with an intelligent curiosity. American culture is ruled by the mob; any apparent aristocracy is an illusion.



Chapter 11, The South, Chapter 12, History

Chapter 11, The South, Chapter 12, History Summary and Analysis

Mencken hates the American South; it is that simple. He thinks it is crude, uncultured, full of idiots and thinks that if the late Confederacy disappeared, the world would probably be better for it. Baptist and Methodist "barbarism" rules it now. But at one time, it had the greatest civilization of the Western Hemisphere. They actually had an aristocracy, a leisure class.

The Civil War destroyed it all. Virginia is the greatest loss, today without art, literature, philosophy, mind or her own aspiration. The best blood of the south has been drawn out and the worst blood of all of Western Europe remains. The line between the high-class and low-class South was clearly drawn before, without intermarriage. Free inquiry is destroyed by idiotic certainty.

The Confederate people are cowards and fools as bred by the feudal arrangements set up by the Southern aristocracy. No true gallantry survives. Mencken then speculates on what the Confederacy would have been like had it won. He thinks it would be richer, be more cultured and have abolished slavery by the 1880s. If only the Confederate aristocracy had not yielded to pressure from the poor and disenfranchised the colored brother.

Mencken transitions to discuss history, which he believed is written mostly by third-rate men. He argues that too many respectful and intelligent men are forgotten to history. He longs to hear what intelligent men would have said about the great men of history, and how they would have mocked them.

Mencken then comments on the nature and psychology of revolution, on the true history of New England, which is mostly owed to the anti-Puritans. He critiques what he calls "New Deal No. 1" in France in the mid 1840s and how it led to revolution. Shared wealth replaced capitalism and Mencken draws an analogy with currently circumstances in the United States. He argues that the Greeks have been overestimated throughout history. He ends the chapter with an analysis of the tragic losses of talent in wars, the troubles England endures due to World War I (it took the wrong side) and he notes the tragic state of the Hapsburgs.



Chapter 13, Statesmen, Chapter 14, American Immortals

Chapter 13, Statesmen, Chapter 14, American Immortals Summary and Analysis

Mencken admires many American statesmen. He lavishes praise on George Washington for scorning foreign entanglements, enjoying whiskey, avoiding piety and ignored the private morals of his neighbors. In the United States today, he would be eligible for no office. Mencken wonders whether Lincoln was a Christian; perhaps he only rejected the Methodist and Baptist dogmas of his time. Lincoln has become an American myth, but he was a practical politician of great talent; he was a dark horse with great rhetoric. Further, Lincoln was simply wrong to hold that the Union soldiers died for the self-determination of Americans; the Confederates ended up being dominated.

Mencken covers President Grant and the corruption in his administration, along with his military prowess. He called Grover Cleveland a "good man in a bad trade." He was obsessed with duty and widely hated. Teddy Roosevelt, in Mencken's view, was beloved by the people, but his political ideas were similar to the Kaiser's in Germany. He believed in the religion of militarism. And in fact, Kaiser Wilhelm was more moderate. Roosevelt was violent and prone to dramatic mood swings.

However, Mencken is hardest on William Jennings Bryan, seeing him as having lived too long and descended so deeply in the mud that he could not be taken seriously. He was a charlatan, insane and with no sense of dignity. He preferred the company of fools to the great men of his day. He constantly inflamed half-wits against their betters. Mencken encountered him first at the Scopes monkey trial, where he argued against the teaching of evolution, and he gives a detailed description of the rage and fury in Bryan's eyes as he slowly lost the case, how he thirsted for blood and lost control.

Mencken has strong distaste for Wilson too, describing him as a typical Puritan who, at least, tried to pretend he was a gentleman. President Coolidge was unlike the average American, as he was reserved and agnostic. His life was full of fortune, as was his election and presidency. He ends with a discussion of Harding.

In the next chapter, Mencken discusses "American Immortals", the great men who were not statesmen. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes was a tool of the Liberals and an inconsistent reasoner. Professor Thorstein Veblen, a socialist intellectual, is denounced by Mencken, but Veblen's ideas spread throughout the American intelligentsia. Mencken read his books and found his ideas simple and unremarkable; but they were stated with grandiosity. He then goes on to critique Veblen's ideas as shallow for the rest of the piece.

Mencken believes that John D. Rockefeller is interesting, but not for his business prowess, rather for what he spent his money on, such as foundations for research. It's not clear whether the foundations will be worthwhile.



Chapter 15, Odd Fish, Chapter 16, Economics

Chapter 15, Odd Fish, Chapter 16, Economics Summary and Analysis

Chapter 15 finds Mencken discussing a variety of unusual men. For instance, a man, Mr. Gray, was electrocuted as punishment for a murder; he ate with a man, Valentino, who was to die of a fatal illness a week later. In both cases, he describes the events prior to their deaths.

Mencken discusses the surprise he feels that no one has violated the tomb of the honorable Charles Joseph Bonaparte, Secretary of the Navy and Attorney-General under Teddy Roosevelt. Charles was a strange man for a variety of reasons, a sort of Catholic Puritan. Finally, Mencken recounts the case of Sister Aimee, a woman he met at a basilica in Los Angeles. An orthodox Methodist revival was at work inside. Aimee was a rich evangelist; Mencken reacts to the religious "orgy" with disgust. Some attempted to jail her, but it was disingenuous. Some think she will be hung.

In Chapter Sixteen, Mencken discusses economics. He begins by noting that one of the most valuable human possessions is the reputation of being rich. Most value money beyond its worth, but having it makes men nicer. He thinks it is absurd to think that capitalism will give way to "scientific" socialism. Socialism is incompatible with the facts; capitalism will not collapse in America and in any event, it has produced almost all of the civilization available today. The accumulation of capital has created a new world. The Bolshevik frauds took away the ownership of tools from their workers while looking for utopia, producing starvation.

In a later essay, he criticizes the American Medical Association for making it too difficult to become a doctor, but he doesn't see why anyone should get too upset about it. There is little wrong with wanting to make a living, which the more restricted class of doctors enjoys quite a lot of. Mencken thinks professional classes can create an American aristocracy, which he prefers.



Chapter 17, Pedagogy, Chapter 18, Psychology

Chapter 17, Pedagogy, Chapter 18, Psychology Summary and Analysis

Mencken thinks that next to being a priest, the worst is job being a teacher. You are underpaid, get no respect and wear yourself out doing the impossible. Mencken thought in his day that teachers were being pushed to convert learning into an automatic process. On the old view of teaching, you simply taught and left the student to figure out the rest. Mencken thinks the teacher should be required to understand the material and have to pass an IQ test.

In an October, 1928 editorial, Mencken notes that he is sad to seeing the boys going to school in Baltimore. Schoolboys are not happy; in fact, school-days are the least happy in life. The young are forced to associate with adults they don't respect and turn to stimulation from their fellow students and get into trouble. No new-fangled teaching method will fix the problem. Mencken suggests hanging the teaching professors and giving teachers an implement to thrash the children with.

In other pieces, Mencken discusses classical learning, the value of higher education, the passing down of knowledge, and so on, articulating opinions characteristically at variance with those of his day.

Mencken thinks that psychological science is in chaos; no one agrees, not the Freudians, the Behaviorists or the Gestalt psychologists. But they may end up laying the foundation for a rational psychology. He argues that it would be worthwhile to study the psychological differences between various divisions among persons, such as producers and exploiters, Protestants and Catholics, etc. He thinks people will divide along a single dimension that ranges from the mind of a slave to the "free artist." Mencken then discusses the distinction. Mencken also attacks the psychology of the crowd. He believes the Freudianism is "quackery", particularly with respect to its explanation of lying.



Chapter 19, Science, Chapter 20, Quackery

Chapter 19, Science, Chapter 20, Quackery Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 19, Mencken reflects on science. He discusses the nature of hypotheses, arguing that we need more of them and says that men are good at making guesses. He discusses Darwin, arguing that progress among humans often moves too fast and incites reaction. He then critiques a philosopher, Mr. Ayres, for arguing that science cannot teach us how to live because it cannot account for the moral order. In another essay, Mencken contrasts the very different jobs of the biologist and the physicist/astronomer.

Mencken thinks that astronomers are too "cavalier" about there being life on other planets. It seems that the absence of carbon on these planets makes it unlikely. He also sees the progress of civilization as trading one nuisance for another. He argues that the telephone is a "boon to bores." Mencken is opposed to them in theory but thinks they are necessary in practice. He, however, thinks it has done him more harm than good. The invention of modern times Mencken likes most is the thermostat.

In "Quackery" Mencken ridicules laws that restrict quack healing practices, like those of Christian Science. He thinks that they are largely harmless and that letting doctor's opinion make law is a recipe for tyranny. Mencken thinks that Chiropractors are quacks as well; he traces the origin of the practice to Andrew T. Still, the father of osteopathy. However, he doubts the more serious charges against them, such as that they propagate epidemics.

Mencken next turns to a criticize Anthony Comstock, a sort of professional busybody and censor. He was an old school Puritan and did not believe in virtue, only police power. He tried to restrict access to lewd material, such as books, but failed.

Mencken thinks that greatest delusion of democratic societies is that all men are capable of reasoning and can be converted by evidence. But religion would collapse if this were so, as would many other beliefs. Politics tends to be converted from being rooted in reasons to feelings. The number of half-wits is far larger than most will admit. In the next piece, Mencken attacks Mary Baker G. Eddy, the founder of Christian Science. He claims that she made up a history of herself and was a simple fraud. He also attacks theosophy but notes that its followers are fewer in number. Mencken goes on to discuss executive secretaries, husbandmen and zoos, all as forms of waste and quackery put together.



Chapter 21, The Human Body, Chapter 22, Utopian Flights

Chapter 21, The Human Body, Chapter 22, Utopian Flights Summary and Analysis

Mencken believes that the nature of disease still gives pathologists pause. It is hard to define, save as a departure from regular functioning. However, he believes that some diseases, despite shortening a man's life, can improve it. He discusses what he regards as an absurd overemphasis on the importance of athletes developing striated muscle tissue and other health fads. Mencken sometimes wonders if most illness isn't simply determined by a man's constitution, as he once knew a man who treated his body as he pleased and lived to be eighty-four.

Mencken picks up the issue of understanding what health is, as opposed to disease, again. He thinks disease must be as natural as health, for only very simple organisms could regularly avoid breakdown. Happiness seems to be much the same thing. Mencken next notes that the renaissance may have been generated by the Black Death killing off European proletarians of low intelligence, making Western Europe more intelligent.

In "Utopian Flights" Mencken begins by suggesting that the method of choosing legislators should be replaced by the method of choosing jurors. Legislators should be chosen by chance and against their will. It would reduce election costs, eliminate campaigns and fill law-making houses with people who think of public service as a chore, which will lead to better laws.

Mencken next writes about the idiocy of millionaires. They buy unoriginal assets and seem to be largely swindlers. The rich men in American can be divided into those who waste their money on stupid matters and those who buy public esteem through charity and patronage to the arts. Mencken finds the second crowd duller than the first; he then suggests a series of absurd but more entertaining things the second class could spend their money on.

Mencken recalls that old monarchies subjected officials to a higher standard of behavior than most and could prosecute them in special courts according to special laws. This was thought to keep them in line. Mencken recommends a similar system for the United States. He then outlines and defends his own plan. Following this is a discussion of the deleterious effects of alcohol, which Mencken believes are exaggerated.



Chapter 23, Souvenirs of a Journalist, Chapter 24, Criticism

Chapter 23, Souvenirs of a Journalist, Chapter 24, Criticism Summary and Analysis

Mencken opens Chapter 23 with a piece reporting his coverage of the Scopes Monkey Trial in Dayton, Tennessee. To Mencken, the town is a backwoods sty, but he meets some tolerable individuals. A reporter woman tells Mencken about the jurors; he notes passing preachers condemning reading. In a church service, Mencken observes people totally out of control. Many were at the trial, mostly insane, including William Jennings Bryan.

In the next piece, Mencken reports on a boxing match between Dempsey and Carter; most wanted Dempsey to lose since he evaded service in World War I. Mencken describes the actual fight at some length. In the next piece, Mencken draws some psychological lessons from the fight, lessons drawn from the public perception of the fight. He also notes that Dempsey won.

In other pieces, Mencken discusses his observations about Henry Cabot Lodge, and covers the awful aspects of prohibition, that it undermined state revenues, created bootleggers, alcohol is still available but more expensive, and so on. Prohibition was a failure. He follows this up with a report on the end of prohibition, including the public political debates that surrounded it. Mencken also covers his polemics against the New Deal, which lasted from 1933 until the war began. He notes, in particular, what a disaster the New Deal programs were in practice and the foolishness of the "Brain Trust" who thought they could run the economy themselves.

In Chapter 24, Mencken argues that the best literary critics are those who write not to refute error and advance a doctrine, but who aim to write a work of art. Mencken goes through the essay defending this point and using various writers as illustrations. He concludes by arguing that the best literature arises out of having true enemies; that is what critics are for. The next piece is brief, consisting in a brief, absurd test for literary critics.



Chapter 25, Literature, Chapter 26, Literati

Chapter 25, Literature, Chapter 26, Literati Summary and Analysis

Mencken turns from literary criticism to literature in Chapter 25. He begins with a discussion of the mystery of inspiration, of how odd it is that some days ideas flow freely and others they are dammed up. All experience this. It may initially seem hard to account for; Mencken speculates that it might be biological. In the next piece, Mencken argues that poetry should be either a series of intrinsically musical words or a series of false ideas, allowing the reader to escape from life. It can also be both. In the same essay, Mencken comments that a man's taste in poetry is an indicator of his inner cravings and "credulities."

Mencken next criticizes new poets for being too cerebral, attacking the problems of art scientifically. He argues later that books written on prose style are written by writers who cannot write. In one essay, he analyzes authorship as a trade and covers the nature of the author at work, which is difficult because it is almost by nature solitary. Mencken sees authors as dividing into two general classes, English or Continental. Several others essays cover types of literature and types of tastes in literature.

In Chapter 27, Mencken covers various great poets and those who read them. He starts out by commenting that Emerson is for shallow "lunch-table idealists". He discusses the fact that Edgar Allen Poe was the father of the American short story and wrote his works mostly before anyone noticed him. Mencken laments the hostility that surrounded Walt Whitman towards the end of his life. He argues that Huckleberry Finn is one of history's great literary masterpieces, equal to Don Quixote, Robinson Crusoe and better than Tristram Shandy. Mencken greatly admires practically everything about Mark Twain, in his writings and in his character.

Mencken considered William Dean Howells the "national ideal of a literary character," seeing him as urbane, clean and respectable. Unfortunately, later in life no one criticized his books, only praised them. He was not a true legend, nor were his novels particularly memorable. Mencken covers his attitude about Ambrose Bierce, who he sees as having a unique allergy to slaughter and had a taste for the macabre, relating him to Poe. His critical judgments, though, were often silly.

Mencken goes on to cover various other writers, such as Stephen Crane, who he thinks of as the most romantic American author of the nineteenth century, Hamlin Garland, Henry James, Theodore Dreiser, Ring Lardner, James Huneker, and Joseph Conrad.



Chapter 27, Music, Chapter 28, The Lesser Arts

Chapter 27, Music, Chapter 28, The Lesser Arts Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 27, Mencken proceeds to analyze various musicians and types of music. He opens with an expression of admiration for Beethoven, for his stature only grows continually. The nineteenth century had many great musicians and composers, but Beethoven was best. Schubert, Mencken notes, was lucky enough to avoid too much popularity; he simply could not write for the mob and failed when he tried. He praises Brahms' Sextet for Strings, Opus 18 to the skies.

Mencken regards Wagner's achievements as stupendous, particularly given his two shrill wives; he denies that Parsifal is meant to praise Christianity, despite Nietzsche's protestations. He argues that Johann Strauss's centenary went by unnoticed in America because a Viennese Waltz is essentially a joyous and merry phenomenon, which was effectively banned when alcohol was banned in the United States. Mencken notes in the next essay that the waltz never really goes out of fashion, and is impressed at how simple Richard Strauss's music is.

Mencken discusses opera, arguing that anyone who appreciates aural beauty will find it obnoxious. The genuine music-lover will endure the outer failings of opera to get at the beautiful music at its core. Mencken then analyzes music as a trade, seeing it as difficult due to the level of technique and mastery it requires. He thinks it is futile to train the mob in music and reflects on the rewards a musical artist receives from her work.

Chapter 28, The Lesser Arts, covers a variety of arts not held in top esteem. Mencken finds oil-painting half alien within the fine arts. He prefers sculpture. He finds art criticism to lack clarity and sense, and new critics are as vague and absurd as those they venerate. New architecture makes little progress in the United States and Mencken somewhat sympathizes with the resistance.

Mencken then discusses the purpose of art galleries, the relationship between art and nature, and that artists tend to oppose their circumstances and countrymen. He argues that bad artists try to hide their inability by creating a new formula and he then reflects on drama, which he sees as the most democratic of art forms, as they are often made for everyone. He finds that actors are mostly "blatant and obnoxious posturers and wind-bags". Other subjects are reviewed, including oratory, and the love of ugliness.



Chapter 29, Buffooneries, Chapter 30, Sententiae, Chapter 31, Appendix

Chapter 29, Buffooneries, Chapter 30, Sententiae, Chapter 31, Appendix Summary and Analysis

Chapter 29 contains a variety of silly essays that Mencken penned. The first is a sort of play where pallbearers discuss the philosophical nature of death. Some argue that death is the end of life, others think we live on in the memories of others, still others give religious theories. Next Mencken translates the Declaration of Independence into ordinary American English, as spoken by the masses.

In the third piece, Mencken unveils a dialogue between Pharaoh Cheops, who built the Sphinx in Egypt, and a friend. They discuss the comparative architectures of Egypt and Babylon. The prose, however, speaks as if the social conditions are the same as they are today, containing labor union strikes in the construction of the Sphinx, for instance. The fourth piece claims that December 20th, 1917 was the seventy-fifth anniversary of the invention of the bathtub. Mencken fabricated this myth deliberately to expose the foolishness of other media outlets. Mencken not only saw it in other papers, but in reference books, and so on. An entirely fictitious story of the invention is included as well.

The fifth piece is a reflection on the leaders and events of World War I. Mencken infamously sided with Kaiser Wilhelm and was admired him. In the sixth piece, Mencken tells the story of Yen Li-Shen, a physician, who healed a rich tax-collector, Chu Yi-Foy. He saved Chu Yi-Foy's life on two occasions and received an enormous amount of wealth from him as a reward. The chapter contains a piece that is, in fact, a brief, silly leaflet containing ridiculous visitation rules. The final essays draw out descriptions from single words, and the names of people and things.

Chapter 30 is a list of "maxims, epigrams and apothegms" of Mencken's composed over a long period of time. Chapter 31 contains two small entries, both about the meaning of life. They are:

"Q: If you find so much that is unworthy of reverence in the United States, then why do you live here? A: Why do men go to zoos?"

"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."



Characters

H. L. Mencken

Henry Louis Mencken (1880-1956) is the author of *A Mencken Chrestomathy*. In his day, he was a famous journalist, satirist, editor and critic of American culture; he was also a renowned student of American English. It is arguable that Mencken, often called "Sage of Baltimore" was among the most important American writers and stylists of the first half of the twentieth century.

Mencken is most famous for writing an extensive student of the English language as it is spoken in the United States known as *The American Language*, along with his reporting on the famous evolution controversy that culminated in the Scopes trial, which Mencken famous coined "the Monkey trial".

Mencken wrote for many Baltimore publications, starting with the *Baltimore Morning Herald* in 1899 and then becoming a literary critic for *The Smart Set*. In 1924, he and George Jean Nathan started *The American Mercury*; he also wrote a variety of essays and editorials elsewhere. *A Mencken Chrestomathy* is a collected of Mencken's choicest writings and illustrates his unusual and famous opinions (mostly negative) of Americans, southerners, women, religion, marriage, and democracy, among other things.

Mencken was particularly critical of "quacks" like Christian scientists, chiropractors, osteopaths, and fundamentalist Christianity. He despised the masses, thinking them unfit to rule themselves, but generally maintained a light-hearted and comic attitude towards them. He strongly opposed the New Deal and also America's entry into World War II. He was a great fan of American Literature and European Classical Music.

Humanity

In some ways, all of H. L. Mencken's writings are an attack of humanity, sometimes as a whole and other times only a single part of it. Mencken generally regarded human life as absurd. He was an agnostic and thought it was quite obvious that the universe did not exist for humanity, but that humanity was simply some sort of cosmic joke. He found the idea that humans had anything divine within them absurd and thought that most people were fools, easily led around by those few scoundrels smart enough to fool them.

Humans have a tendency to glorify themselves beyond all justification, in Mencken's view; they need skewering, and in any event, it gave Mencken great pleasure to treat them this way. He was famous for saying that "the common man is a fool," that democracy glorified "mediocrity" and that democracy was so prone to produce idiots that one day the people will elect a complete idiot to the presidency, and so on.

In fact, Mencken seems to regard nearly everything that humans do as open for criticism, worth mocking, making light of and so on. There were few exceptions to this



rule. Many European Classical composers were among those he admired. He greatly appreciated a variety of American writers, especially Mark Twain. In general, he preferred the company of "charming" men and had a soft spot for German culture and Kaiser Wilhelm.

Women

Mencken was notoriously skeptical and critical of women, if not an out and out sexist. He thought women feigned being stupid but in fact had great social intelligence and used it to destroy great men. It is a wonder that he married.

The Mob

Mencken routinely expressed distaste for the average man, in particular when they were gathered together as a group and even more so when voting.

Americans

There were few Americans Mencken liked; as a result, he thought most of them were fools, led around by scoundrels.

Southerners

Since the end of the Civil War, Southerners have been worthless spiritually and culturally; the Civil War killed off the greatest civilization in the history of the Americas - the Southern aristocracy.

Statesmen

Mencken has great distaste for most of the great American statesmen; those he does admire he admires for unusual reasons.

William Jennings Bryan

William Jennings Bryan was a famous preacher and four-time president candidate who had extraordinary fame. But his life ended in disgrace when he grandstanded in his role as prosecutor in the Scopes Monkey trial. Mencken savaged him.

Quacks

Mencken thought the United States was full of quacks, especially Christian fundamentalists, Christian scientists, osteopaths and chiropractors.



Great Composers

One of the few groups of people that Mencken almost universally admired were the great European Classical composers.

American Writers

Mencken was a student of American literature and admired many American writers, especially Mark Twain.



Objects/Places

Baltimore, Maryland

Mencken was born in Baltimore and spent his entire life there and did all of his writing there.

The Universe

In Mencken's view, the universe is meaningless and absurd and humanity is even more absurd for thinking he is the center of it.

The United States

Mencken's country of origin and country of concern in his writings.

The South

Mencken lived in Baltimore, a nominally Southern city, but he despised the South as a whole, at least the Post-Civil War South.

The Baltimore Sun

Baltimore's most famous paper and one of the most famous newspapers of record in the United States. Mencken was among its most famous writers and editors.

The Smart Set

A literary magazine Mencken wrote for in the twenties.

The American Mercury

A magazine Mencken co-founded in 1924 and wrote for until 1933.

Aphorisms

Pithy words of wisdom that Mencken was famous for coining.



Religion

Mencken hated most religion, especially Southern Baptist and Methodist Christianity.

Morality

Mencken had a Nietzschean perspective on morality, thinking that it was mostly used to beat up on people and control them.

Death

Mencken thought that death was almost as absurd as life and that it brought out many of people's most foolish beliefs.

Government

Mencken had a strong libertarian strength and accordingly thought that government was a largely worthless institution full of criminals.

Democracy

Mencken thought that democracy had some advantages but that by and large it glorified idiocy and mediocrity.

Quackery

Mencken notoriously ferreted out and exposed quacks of all sorts.

The Scopes Monkey Trial

The famous trial in 1926 where John Scopes was charged with teaching evolution in the classroom. Mencken covered the case and skewered the prosecuting attorney, the famous William Jennings Bryan.

Practical Jokes

Mencken played a famous practical joke on the public once, heralding the seventy-fifth anniversary of the bathtub in the mid-twenties. He had fabricated an entire story of the bathtub's invention; the fabrication was repeated in newspapers and even reference books.

Themes

Elitism

Mencken was an elitist of the most explicit sort. However, he did not express a standard form of elitism, where some race, religion or other group was superior to another or even superior to the rest of humanity. Instead, Mencken was an equal opportunity elitist, believing that every community produces idiots and fools. The truly worthy people were extremely few and far between.

Mencken usually preferred social hierarchies and liked best those people at the top (so long as the hierarchies weren't governments). As a result, he had a sort of natural elitism and preferences for aristocracy. Superior individuals were typically mistreated and oppressed by their communities but survived to set themselves apart by sheer will and merit, not race, class, etc. Mencken clearly conceived of himself as a member of this group.

A clear example of Mencken's natural elitism is on display in his writings about the American South. Mencken held that since the Civil War, the South almost exclusively contained fools, morons, religious fanatics, quacks and crooks, but that prior to the War, the Southern aristocracy was the greatest class of individuals that had ever inhabited the American continents. They were genteel, well-read, and thoughtful and had a culture of honor. But the Civil War had led to their destruction, leaving the South with only a mass of lower class white trash. Southern literature, Southern art, Southern everything fell into decline.

Absurdity

Mencken was an agnostic, and unusually public in his disdain for religion for his day. Mencken stridently resisted the idea that the universe was created by God for a purpose. Instead, he thought that its origin was a mystery. However, wherever it came from, it was not made for man. In one essay, he argues that what science is uncovering about the universe shows that man is not its center and that it has no obvious utility for man.

One ridiculous feature of humanity was their penchant for imputing purposes to the universe and things that in fact don't possess them and elevating themselves to great importance when in fact they were of no importance at all. These thoughts led Mencken to a famously absurdist approach to human life.

He often despised various groups of people, but his hatred did not seem to consume him or obsess him. Instead, he would skewer someone who annoyed him and then he would move on. He would have a laugh at the expense of a "boob" and then think on other things. In fact, he considered his interest in humanity as one of the only things that



gave him a reason to live because it was analogous to the enjoyment one has visiting a zoo.

Because Mencken viewed life as an absurdity, he was annoyed most often by those who were absolutely certain that it had one and that they were at the center of it. He was particularly annoyed with those who took this view of themselves and built a morality around it that they used to control and dominate others.

Charm and Ribaldry

Mencken was both an elitist and an absurdist. He had no patience for the masses and believed that life had no ultimate meaning or that if it did that we could not understand it. In Mencken's mind, if God exists, he is a sadist and a trickster and is to be feared. As a result, Mencken had few things he could explicitly identify as good and valuable. He loved the English language, American writers, good jokes, and European classical music, among others things, but it was certain people that he enjoyed most.

Mencken did not value the personal qualities that most others did. Kindness did not rank highly for him, although honesty did. Righteous and moral individuals often seemed to him uninterested and dishonorable. Mencken highly valued honor, creativity, and wit, but he seems most fond of the qualities of charm and ribaldry. It seems that Mencken can ascribe no higher praise to a person than to say that he is "charming". If a person had manners, learning, sophistication, wit and was cultured, these things came together to give the individual a certain element of charm.

Ribaldry was also another favor quality of Mencken's. The ribald is the silly, in a raucous sort of way. The ribald man is irreverent, coarse and mocking. If Mencken aimed to emulate any personal quality, it was quite possibly this, and he greatly enjoyed penning essays that illustrated this quality even in full-length pieces.



Style

Perspective

A Mencken Chrestomathy is Mencken's personal compilation of those works of his he considered his best. He organized them into thirty chapters and there are hundreds of pieces to review. His discussions and writings range over many topics, including women, Southerners, quacks and science. However, several strong aspects of his perspective come through across all of his discussions.

Mencken first and foremost has an agnostic and elitist outlook on life. He thinks that we cannot know whether God exists and that anyone who thinks that God has created the world for human enjoyment is clearly a fool or a zealot. As such, he is hostile to religion, particularly fundamentalist, southern religions such as Baptism and Methodism. He thinks that morality is largely an illusion, consisting of practices of praise and blame that largely manipulate some into serving others, usually great and honorable men to serve the mob.

Mencken also despised most people in most social classes and was an equal opportunity bigot. He only liked a small group of talented, cultured, and usually rich individuals, particularly those he considered "charming". Accordingly, he was hostile to democratic institutions.

Mencken also had a strong libertarian streak. He defended capitalism, hated the New Deal, and especially hated Franklin Roosevelt. He opposed US entry into World War II and generally preferred civic institutions to any and all things political. For Mencken, politicians were mostly criminals and hucksters, although many of them might be personally charming.

Tone

The tone of A Mencken Chrestomathy reflects the perspective of its author. Mencken's perspective is agnostic, elitist, aristocratic and anti-statist; consequently, his tone is agnostic, elitist, aristocratic and anti-statist. The tone of Mencken's essays is agnostic because they display not only hostility to God and religious belief generally but because they express skepticism about the ultimate questions of life having answers or at least being answered by humans. He is particularly annoyed by those who claim for themselves absolute certainty.

The tone of the Chrestomathy is elitist because it consists mostly of essays and articles attacking the lower classes, and usually in all of their forms, including lower-class religions, lower-class people generally, lower-class writing and so on. The tone is acerbic and witty, expressing high-class learning while attacking lower-class practices. The tone is also aristocratic because it focuses on upper-class topics, most of which can only be comprehended by those with higher education. Further, Mencken often



wrote for a literary magazine called "The Smart Set" that was popular on college campuses.

The tone is also anti-statist because of how hostile Mencken is to government, democracy, and most American statesmen. Government mostly attracts the stupid and the power hungry. Democracy is awful because it elevates mediocrity to an ideal. Most American statesmen are dreadful politicians, although Mencken admits that they are often pleasant individuals and quite "charming" to have dinner with.

Structure

A Mencken Chrestomathy is a compilation of Mencken's short articles, essays, and so on. As such it has thirty chapters but they all contain essays, some numerous, numbering twenty or more and others shorter, containing perhaps two to four pieces. The chapters touch on a variety of subject matters that appear to be arranged from the most universal to the most particular of subject.

Mencken reviews his thoughts on human nature in Chapter 1, Homo Sapiens. In Chapter 2 Mencken analyzes various sorts of men. Chapter 3 (mostly) lambastes women as a whole and Chapter 4 unleashes the same witty repartee on religion and religious figures. Morals and crime and punishment come in for scrutiny in Chapters 5 and 6 respectively, and a discussion of Death follows in Chapter 7. Mencken attacks government generally and democracy specifically in Chapters 8 and 9. In Chapter 10, Mencken critiques the American people, and Chapter 11 focuses on Southerners, one of his favorite targets.

Chapters 12, 13, 14 and 15 cover historical topics and personages, covering history, American Statesmen, other American "Immortals" and a final group of "Odd Fish". Chapters 16, 17, 18, 19, and 20 discuss areas of study, first economics, then teaching, psychology, science and, yes, quackery. Chapter 21 analyzes features of the human body, while Chapter 22 engages in "utopian flights."

Chapter 23 is composed of Mencken's journalistic pieces, including his reflections on the Scopes Monkey Trial. Chapters 24, 25, and 26 discuss literary topics, such as criticism, literature and "literati". In Chapters 27 and 28 Mencken reviews music and the "lesser arts". Chapter 29 includes Mencken's "buffoonery". Chapter 30 is full of Mencken's famous aphorisms, whereas Chapter 31 ends the book on a single page, with a "Catechism" and an "Epitaph."



Quotes

"The old anthropomorphic notion that the life of the whole universe centers in the life of man—that human existence is the supreme expression of the cosmic process—this notion seems to be happily on its way toward the Sheol of exploded delusions." Chap. 1, Homo Sapiens, p. 3

"As the rector to lend you any good book on comparative religion: you will find them all listed. They were gods of the highest dignity—gods of civilized peoples—worshipped and believed in by millions. All were omnipotent, omniscient and immortal. And all are dead." Chap. 4, Religion, p. 98

"It is unpleasant, I grant you, to see a man put to death, but the brutality of it is immensely overestimated by those who have never enjoyed that honor." Chap. 6, Crime and Punishment, p. 122

"If I am convinced of anything, it is that Doing Good is in bad taste." Chap. 7, Death, p. 131

"Human existence is always irrational and often painful, but in the last analysis it remains interesting." Chap. 7, p. 133

"All government, in its essence, is a conspiracy against the superior man: its one permanent object is to oppress him and cripple him." Chap. 8, Government, p. 145

"The doctrine is simply this: that the Union soldiers who died at Gettysburg sacrificed their lives to the cause of self-determination ... It is difficult to imagine anything more untrue. The Union soldiers in that battle actually fought against self-determination; it was the Confederates who fought for the right of their people to govern themselves." Chap. 13, Statesman, p. 233

"The easiest job I have ever tackled in the world is that of making money. It is, in fact, almost as easy as losing it. Almost, but not quite." Chap. 16, Economics, p. 300

"To the gods who run the cosmos, disease and health probably look pretty much alike. I am not, of course, privy to the secret lucubration of Yahweh, but it is certainly imaginable that a hearty, incandescent boil gives Him quite as much satisfaction as a damask check, and maybe a great deal more." Chap. 21, The Human Body, p. 375

"In brief, Prohibition is a failure, and it grows a worse failure every day." Chap. 23, Souvenirs of a Journalist, p. 412

"The older I grow, the more I am convinced that the most portentous phenomenon in the whole history of music was the first public performance of the Eroica on April 7th, 1805." Chap. 27, Music, p. 525



"Here is something that the psychologists have so far neglected: the love of ugliness for its own sake, the lust to make the world intolerable. Its habitat is the United States. Out of the melting pot emerges a race which hates beauty as it hates truth." Chap. 28, The Lesser Arts, p. 576

"Every man is his own hell." Chap. 30, Sententiae, p. 617

"Every decent man is ashamed of the government he lives under." Chap. 30, Sententiae, p. 621

"Democracy is the theory that the common people know what they want, and deserve to get it good and hard." Chap. 30, Sententiae, p. 622

"Puritanism - the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy." Chap. 30, Sententiae, p. 624



Topics for Discussion

What is Mencken's general attitude about religion? How is it at variance with those of the American public? Which sort of religions or denominations come in for particular scorn? Why?

In what ways does Mencken hate the "mob"? What is wrong with them? Why are they not fit to rule themselves?

Mencken opposed the New Deal and defended capitalism; this set him at variance with the important men of his day. What were his reasons for such opposition? Were they any good?

What does Mencken hate about the South today? What did he like about the South prior to the Civil War? How does he think the United States would look if the South had won?

Mencken hates "quacks". What are "quacks"? What are some of his favorite examples of "quackery"? And how does he sometimes defend "quacks" against their detractors? Why?

Pick three of Mencken's aphorisms, explain their meaning and then state why you think they are true, false or neither.

Review Mencken's "Catechism" and explain how it encapsulates Mencken's philosophy of life.