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Summary Article: **MENCKEN, HENRY LOUIS**

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Henry Louis Mencken (September 12, 1880-January 29, 1956), journalism's lead provocateur in America's Jazz Age, was an icon for a generation of skeptics who deplored hypocrisy, self-righteousness, and self-serving men in politics. His newspaper career began at the *Baltimore Morning Herald* in 1899, and he moved up quickly to become Sunday editor of the *Herald* in 1901, and city editor in 1903. When the *Herald* closed in 1906, Mencken moved to the *Baltimore Sun*, and for the rest of his life was on the staff of the *Sun* or *Evening Sun*.

Mencken's magazine career started at the *Smart Set*, where he began reviewing books in 1908. He and George Jean Nathan were co-editors of the literary magazine from 1914 to 1923, bringing it from obscurity to center stage in American letters. Noted for satire and promoting unknown writers, the magazine's discoveries included F. Scott Fitzgerald and Aldous Huxley. Mencken and Nathan founded the *American Mercury* in 1924, and Mencken was sole editor from 1924 to 1933. As a critic of American culture, Mencken may have attained his highest pique in this period. The editors dedicated the *American Mercury* to exploring American life, their goal being "a realistic presentation of the whole gaudy, gorgeous American scene."

Mencken's first book, *George Bernard Shaw: His Plays* (1905), gained little notice. More substantial material soon followed with *The Philosophy of Frederick Nietzsche* (1907); the *Prejudices* series, a collection of essays, in a series of six volumes (1919-1927); and *Treatise of the Gods* (1930). The scholarly *American Language* (1918) was both a critical and a commercial success, and remains in print. Mencken published revised editions in 1921 and 1923, an expanded volume in 1936, and supplements in 1945 and 1948. He published memoirs in a series of three volumes: *Happy Days, 1880-1982* (1940); *Newspaper Days, 1899-1906* (1941); *Heathen Days, 1890-1936* (1943).

The farcical Scopes Trial in July 1925 in Dayton, Tennessee, was a national embarrassment, which meant it was a moment of glory for Mencken. Putting a teacher on trial for teaching evolution gave Mencken the chance to enhance his reputation for South-baiting, a sport he relished. His nationally syndicated commentaries regularly skewered the South as a bastion of religiously inspired ignorance where yokels guarded the gates of stupidity. The trial brought to life his stereotypes of the South and rural America—a culturally barren, bigoted landscape, populated by hillbillies and led by hucksters. He appointed himself chief antagonist to the prosecution, which included William Jennings Bryan, despised by Mencken and a prominent figure among Christian fundamentalists. Mencken left Dayton before the trial ended, missing the dramatic moment when Clarence Darrow called Bryan to the stand to testify as an expert on the Bible. Mencken had a hand in staging the drama, having talked Darrow into defending John Scopes and having the *Baltimore Sun* post Scopes' bail.

For Mencken, Dayton and the trial were emblematic of larger ills in American culture. His attack on the South was an assault on what he saw as a Puritanism that infected American culture with its suffocating moralism that was hostile to art and ideas. He linked the Puritanism with a Christian fundamentalism that thrived on illiteracy and ignorance. Mencken's antipathy to Bryan illustrated a larger criticism of American democracy's essential foible: that because "all men are created equal" their thoughts and abilities must be equal. With more than a little implied elitism, Mencken saw in Bryan's radical egalitarianism an

unchecked democracy that would devolve to mob rule, reined by ignorance and impulse.

Mencken's fondness for German culture resulted in more serious collisions with public sentiment. Prior to World War I, he praised German idealism and ambition while condemning British Puritanism. His byline disappeared from *Sun* newspapers during the war. A minor controversy erupted in the early 1930s over anti-Semitic passages in *Treatise on the Gods*. Like many Americans, he did not foresee the true menace of the Nazis and dismissed them as counterparts to American Klansmen, ignorant but not necessarily evil. In the late 1930s, Mencken's hold slipped on the skeptical imagination, as liberal intellectuals, a substantial part of his audience, found themselves at odds with his isolationist, anti-Franklin D. Roosevelt positions, which opposed both Nazism and any action against it. His earlier German sympathies accelerated his decline in influence after World War II.

As a critic and writer, Mencken had an extraordinary influence on American literature during his era, but still considered himself primarily a journalist. His impact on journalism endured, leaving the gold-standard and stereotype of the profession—the verbally raucous cynic, deft with language, and sharp with criticism.

Further Reading

- William Manchester. *Disturber of the Peace: The Life of H.L. Mencken*, 2nd ed. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986.
- Terry Teachout. *The Skeptic: A Life of H.L. Mencken*. New York: Harper Collins, 2002.
- Fred C. Hobson. *Mencken: A Life*. New York: Random House, 1994.
- Fred C. Hobson. *Serpent in Eden: H.L. Mencken and the South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974.

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Caudill, E. (2007). Mencken, Henry Louis. In S. L. Vaughn (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of American journalism*. London, UK: Routledge. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/mencken>



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