

FISKE HALL NON-SEMINAR PAPER

The Sage of Baltimore
A Life of H.L. Mencken

Luke Chennell

On a blazing hot Sunday afternoon in 1925, Henry Louis Mencken sat at his typewriter in a hotel room in Dayton, Tennessee, stripped to his underwear. While he pecked away in his usual manner, he paused occasionally only to light up another Uncle Willie cigar and to roar with laughter at his own writing. The dispatch he wrote to the Baltimore *Evening Sun* was inarguably some of his best work. Mencken's dispatch told in flowing prose of a visit he and a female journalist took to a Holy Roller revival in the hills outside of Dayton, where "the old-time religion was genuinely on tap." The dispatch, later edited and published as "The Hills of Zion," would be one of Mencken's most reprinted essays.¹

Mencken was understandably concerned with religion at the time. The trial of John Scopes, a junior-high school teacher charged with teaching evolutionary doctrine contrary to Tennessee's anti-evolution laws, brought national attention to rising Christian fundamentalists across the nation. Though Scopes was eventually found guilty, the sensational battle of Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan provided endless amounts of amusement for the country at large, no matter what the legal outcome.

Always near the center of attention was Mencken. His lengthy and subjective dispatches to the Sun describing the atmosphere of the town and the trial are pieces of reporting which have hardly been repeated nor equaled in the history of journalism. Mencken truly was at the top of his game.²

Mencken was easily the most celebrated journalist of the early twentieth century. His brash, bold and witty style of writing and reporting made him instantly quotable. Particularly with the rise of mass media, Mencken's fame spread nationwide. His opinions on everything from religion to the virtue of steam locomotives were widely disseminated and read by a growing intellectual elite in the United States.

Mencken left his cultural mark on much more of the literary world than just journalism, though. Mencken was a driving critical force behind theater, fiction and nonfiction. His criticism of *belles lettres* shaped much of the literary revolution of the early 1920s. His vocal and constant attacks on Victorian morality and censorship were vital to the creation of the Jazz Age and the great revival of American fiction during the 1920s. Mencken edited two major national literary magazines, the *Smart Set* and the *American Mercury*. He cultivated important authors including Theodore Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis,

¹ Mencken's essay originally appeared in the *Baltimore Evening Sun*, 13 July 1925. After much editing, it reappeared in H.L. Mencken, *Prejudices: Fifth Series*. (New York: Knopf, 1923.) Most people today cite the version in _____, *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (New York: Knopf, 1949), 392-398.

² Mencken's dispatches are collected in Marion Elizabeth Rodgers, ed., *The Impossible H.L. Mencken: A Selection of His Best Newspaper Stories* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 562-608.

but was also a champion of many other writers. Mencken published nearly 700 authors in the *American Mercury* during its ten year run.³

Behind Mencken's drive were a number of factors. His strong opinions were drawn largely from his middle-class background of the late nineteenth century and from his belief in the philosophy of Frederick Nietzsche and the agnosticism of Thomas Henry Huxley. Mencken's lifelong distrust of religion in any organized form conditioned largely his opinions on the events of his day, as did his lifelong belief in a sort of Jeffersonian natural aristocracy. Mostly, though, his belief that anyone in power should be a target of criticism and even scorn drove his political, literary and public efforts. Mencken always considered himself an iconoclast, one who was a "gay fellow who heaves dead cats into sanctuaries and then goes roistering down the highways of the world, proving to all men that doubt, after all, is safe."⁴

Mencken was born on September 12, 1880, in the place that would be his home forever, Baltimore, Maryland. Mencken's birth came on as fortunate a date as he could wish – Defender's day, the day of the anniversary of the battle at Fort McHenry in which Francis Scott Key wrote "The Star Spangled Banner" during the war of 1812. Each year Mencken's birthday was thus celebrated with fireworks, parades and much ballyhoo.⁵

Mencken was a healthy baby, his birth costing the sum of ten dollars. Mencken's slight mother Anna was often accosted by passerby on the street asking, "Good God, girl, is that boy yours?" He later remarked that "had cannibalism not been abolished in Maryland some time before my birth, I'd have butchered beautifully."⁶

The better part of Mencken's nonage was spent in the typical mode of a middle-class child of the bourgeois in the late nineteenth century. Mencken grew up on Hollins Street just off of Union Square in Baltimore, which at that time was on the outskirts of the city. Mencken would live virtually all of his life, save for five years during his marriage, in the same row house on Hollins street. Mencken's father, August, was a second-generation cigar merchant whose business, August Mencken & Brothers, was quite successful. To Mencken, his father was "the center of his small world, and in my eyes a man of illimitable puissance and resourcefulness... There was never an instant in my childhood when I doubted my father's capacity to resolve any difficulty that menaced me..." His father indulged his oldest son to a great deal, buying him a pony, and taking him weekly on his forty mile trip to Washington on business.⁷

³ Johnny L. Kloefkorn, *A Critical Study of the Work of H.L. Mencken As Literary Editor and Critic of The American Mercury*, (Emporia, Kansas: Emporia State University, 1958.)

⁴ Mencken, *Chrestomathy*, 17.

⁵ Fred Hobson, *Mencken: A Life*, (New York: Random House, 1994), 17.

⁶ H.L. Mencken, *Happy Days*, (New York: Knopf, 1940), 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, vii. Mencken's *Happy Days* was one of three books – *Newspaper Days* (New York: Knopf, 1941) and *Heathen Days* (New York: Knopf, 1943) are the others - that composed his for-public-consumption autobiography. Mencken also wrote two other volumes to be time-sealed until 35 years after his death that were of a much more personal nature and concerned his life in the literary world. These are *My Life as Author and Editor* (New York: Knopf, 1993) and *Thirty-Five Years of Newspaper Work* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1994).

Mencken recalled the events of his youth with both humor and pride. Mencken's yearly trips to the family's summer home in Ellicott City, then far outside the city of Baltimore, provided him broad new places to explore, and was the first place that he caught a glimpse of a newspaper being printed. It was one of many stupendous experiences, things that left a mark on him.⁸

Many years later, Mencken would trace many of the defining moments of his life to the blissful period during the time between his third and thirteenth birthday, a time which he reflected on as "placid, secure, uneventful and happy." Mencken later pegged two incidents as critical during these years: the first was the gift from his father of a Dorman Baltimore no. 10 self-inker printing press. The Dorman press provided Mencken with a short-lived business printing business cards, though his father mangled much of the type so badly that he was forced to abbreviate his name to H.L., as he had no lower case r's. It "got the smell of printer's ink up my nose at the tender age of eight, and it has been swirling through my sinuses ever since."⁹

The second was his discovery of Mark Twain. Poking through the house at Hollins street, Mencken discovered his father's collection of books and quickly began to devour them. Though most of his father's works were dull – a history of Freemasonry in Maryland, *A Pictorial History of the World's Great Nations From the Earliest Dates to the Present Time*, and other popular literature of the time, August Mencken had been a fan of Mark Twain during his younger days. Henry Mencken's first reading of Twain was in *Huckleberry Finn*. He called his first reading of *Huckleberry Finn* "genuinely terrific... If I undertook to tell you the effect it had upon me my talk would sound frantic, and even delirious." Mencken would thereafter read *Huckleberry Finn* once a year well into his forties. He said that it was "as transparent to a boy of eight as to a man of eighty," and his impressions of it would later largely color his views of American literature.¹⁰

Henry Mencken's youth might have been happy, but his teenage years were anything but. Much of this can be blamed on his father and the culture of the Mencken family. Mencken had originally been schooled at F. Knapp's institute for boys, then a common place for sons of upper-middle class Baltimore. Mencken's experiences at F. Knapp's Institute were happy. He experimented during this time with a number of pastimes, including photography and chemistry. Mistakenly, August Mencken thought the boy was of a scientific and mechanical bent. He thus enrolled him in the Baltimore Polytechnic for several years, a time at which Henry Mencken suffered greatly. He said that after his graduation "all I learned at the Polytechnic was forgotten a year after my graduation. I can't imagine a more useless education than I received there." He could hardly understand why he was being put through such torture. Even in the midst of such turmoil, though, Mencken proved an adept scholar. He took a special interest in numbers, earning \$100 from his father for receiving the highest mark of his class on the graduation exam. Still, the future did not look bright – to Henry. August Mencken fully expected his oldest son to take over the family business, something that the younger Mencken could barely understand. He had no taste for figures and cigar making, finding the pursuit of *belles lettres* much more enticing. Frustrated with his father's wishes, Mencken did everything but to openly rebel against his father. Though he worked at the cigar factory until 1899,

⁸ Ibid., 212-215.

⁹ Mencken, *Happy Days*, 203.

¹⁰ Ibid., 166-170.

Mencken was seriously unhappy – probably the unhappiest that he would ever be in his life. Mencken noted privately that he contemplated suicide during this period, but thought better of it.¹¹

Mencken's inner rebellion finally turned to another form that would prove much more fruitful. Immediately after his father's death on January 13, 1899, Mencken reported the following Monday to hang around the city room of the Baltimore *Herald*, hoping to gain an assignment from the city editor, Max Ways. Ways reported at first that there were no specific assignments available at the time, but that if Mencken were to report back, he might have something. Mencken did so diligently for some four weeks, and finally received the assignment to go to Govanstown, a small suburb, whose correspondent hadn't been heard from for six days – there was an immense blizzard going on at the time. Mencken, finding nothing much to report, managed to scare up a story that a horse and buggy had been stolen. He dutifully wrote the piece and it was published the next day.¹²

His first assignment might have been inauspicious, but he apparently did a good enough job that Ways eventually, after many more trial assignments, hired him on as a cub reporter. Working two jobs – one at the cigar factory and at the *Herald* (at no pay), Mencken was sorely worn out. Not until the summer of 1899 did Ways finally hire Mencken at the salary of \$7 a week, allowing Mencken to quit his job at the cigar factory.¹³

Mencken's meteoric rise within the newspaper is confounding to explain. Mencken first began covering the suburbs of Baltimore, often riding trolley cars at his own expense to retrieve a story. Soon he was moved up to a court reporter for one of the less-busy police districts. However, a stroke of luck bestowed itself when the court reporter for the central police district – the busiest and thus most prestigious – failed to show up to work one day after drinking too much. Max Ways immediately gave Mencken the job as a reprimand to the other reporter.¹⁴

Mencken was now 19, and his rise in the ranks of the paper had only begun. Shortly after his assignment to the central police districts, he was quickly elevated to covering City Hall. Immediately after this came the assignment of Sunday editor in 1901. By the time he was 21, he was city editor, and by the time he was 24, he was managing editor, and by 25 was editor-in-chief. Though Mencken was fond of recalling his days as a young reporter, calling it the “maddest, gladdest, damndest existence ever enjoyed by mortal youth”, his actual years as a working reporter were a relatively small part of his writing career. While Mencken did report on national events for most of his life – never missing a single national political convention from 1904-1948--the vast majority of his time was spent editing newspapers and writing editorial content, not reporting actively.¹⁵

Mencken managed during his salad days of reporting to cover a number of important events, including the Jacksonville Fire of 1901¹⁶ and both political conventions

¹¹ Marion Elizabeth Rodgers, *Mencken: The American Iconoclast* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 37-50.

¹² Mencken, *Newspaper Days*, 6-7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20-24.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 300-305.

of 1904. But the main event that was to leave a major mark on both Mencken and his home city was the great Baltimore Fire of 1904. The fire ravaged some 140 acres, 1,500 buildings and left 35,000 Baltimoreans jobless. It forever changed the look of the city and fundamentally altered the places that Mencken recalled growing up. One of the buildings burned was the *Herald* building in which Mencken worked. Even as the fire raged around them, the *Herald* staff continued working on the next morning's edition, as they knew that any copy they could get out about the fire would be in great demand and could mean a huge increase in circulation. The paper managed to publish during the early part of the fire, but eventually as the fire department began to dynamite buildings in the path near the fire, the *Herald* staff was forced to evacuate.¹⁷

Though they thought that they would return soon – and thus did not bring anything but a few halftones with them – the building soon burned to its steel structure. Mencken's sole remaining artifact of his youthful reporting days was his bent and twisted copy hook, which he kept until his death. The *Herald* continued to publish throughout the fire – the only one of nine Baltimore papers that did. By chartering an agreement with first a Washington paper and then a Philadelphia paper as well as with the B&O railroad, the staff somehow managed to print a Baltimore paper in Philadelphia and yet maintain a daily circulation. However, the toll it took on the staff was incredible. At the end of the period, Mencken hadn't slept for at least three days, and was clearly fatigued from working fourteen hours a day nonstop. The rest of the *Herald* staff was no better. But the staff was justifiably proud of their work. They had produced a paper throughout the midst of one of the great disasters of the early twentieth century.¹⁸

Circulation of the *Herald* picked up for a time, but eventually the paper ran again into financial difficulties which had plagued it long before the fire. The *Herald* was eventually sold to a new owner, and Mencken amicably declined to continue on as editor. Fortunately, Mencken had cultivated prospects at other papers and was even offered a position at *Leslie's*. He was immediately hired onto the Baltimore *Sun*, the paper which he would remain involved with until his crippling stroke in 1948. Mencken's transition to the *Sun* was important, and he knew it. Editors' talents are not easy to transfer to other papers, while reporters can usually find a job at almost any place they try. Mencken's successful transition to Sunday editor of the *Sun* was an important, watershed event in his life, and one that he never forgot. Mencken was to spend nearly all of his life attempting to make the *Sun* franchise into a first-rate entity, though he never considered his work complete.¹⁹

But the *Sun* papers would thrust Mencken into what was clearly his most visible public role and provide him with what would be his print outlet for the rest of his life. The earliest incarnation of these efforts, a column entitled the "Free Lance," brought Mencken both his first local and national acclaim – and criticism. The "Free Lance" was Mencken's vehicle to bombard any local figure of importance. The "Free Lance" was Mencken's first major use of his strong acerbic wit and his signature style. It "served to clarify and organize my ideas... Before it had gone on a year I knew precisely what I was about and where I was heading." Mencken wrote the column to bring about some sort of

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 94-108.

¹⁷ Rodgers, *Mencken: The American Iconoclast*, 80-93.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Mencken, *Thirty-Five Years of Newspaper Work*, 7-17.

reaction, whether it was good or bad – and it did just that. It also increased circulation substantially.²⁰

Mencken's attacks took a few forms. Mostly, he said,

I derided all the rich bankers and industrialists of the town, I denounced both the uplifters and the boomers, and I invented opprobrious nicknames for most of the politicians... In it, I worked out much of the material that was later to enter into my books, and to color the editorial policy of the *American Mercury*.²¹

For most of his career, Mencken sought to produce a magazine that contained material for the "civilized man," a publication of culture and class for the enlightened few who could truly appreciate it.

The first of these efforts began in 1908 with Mencken's involvement with the *Smart Set*, at first a rather tawdry magazine owned by John Adams Thayer with relatively little circulation. Mencken began as a book reviewer, taking on these duties in addition to his newspaper work. Mencken saw potential in it, and with partner George Jean Nathan, took on duties as co-editor of the *Smart Set* in 1914.²²

The work schedule was hectic, to say the least. Mencken kept offices in both New York and Baltimore, traveling weekly by train to see to his interests in New York. This would continue for many, many years. Mencken was always adamant that Baltimore was his home, and that he would not move to New York as he thought it "a society founded upon the wealth of Monte Cristo and upon the tastes of sailors home from a long voyage."²³

Under Mencken and Nathan's tutelage, the *Smart Set* grew into a weekly of some class and distinction, publishing authors including James Branch Cabell, Ruth Suckow, Willa Cather, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson and many others. The *Smart Set* was by no means the leader in the magazine field – other magazines including the *Atlantic Monthly* and others clearly held that distinction – but it was a strong effort at a monthly literary. Mencken and Nathan's working relationship was both playful and productive. Their method of approving manuscripts was simple – both Mencken and Nathan had to agree that something was worth publishing. If one thought a work should be published but the other not, the work was sent back and no further questions were asked.²⁴

All the while, Mencken continued to work for the *Sun* and to produce editorials. Though the "Free Lance" blew up with the beginning of World War I – for reasons to be discussed later - Mencken's constant devotion to work was a major theme in his life. Even until his death, Mencken worked diligently on a number of projects. He also worked with incredible diligence at preserving the materials of his life – an entire room at

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² _____, *My Life As Author and Editor*, 37-47.

²³ Terry Teachout, ed. *A Second Mencken Chrestomathy* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 181.

²⁴ Carl Bode, *Mencken* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 59-77.

the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore is dedicated to his papers, which were carefully organized by him and his secretary before his death.²⁵ But Mencken's life was not all work. He devoted himself quite as ardently to the enjoyment of a number of hobbies as diligently as he did to his literary work.

The first of Mencken's after-hours exploits was a group called the "Stevedores Club," whose members included mostly newspaper men, and whose purpose was to hoist schooners of beer, thus their rather apt title. The "Stevedores" club was of relatively short duration, though Mencken created a number of similar clubs, devoted mostly to the drinking of beer and the discussion of ideas.²⁶

But by far, Mencken's longest and most diverting hobby was music. Mencken played the piano, forming a number of musical "clubs" throughout his life. The one that came most to be associated with him was the Saturday Night Club, an association which he did not found but joined. The Saturday Night Club's purpose was to rehearse and play classical music of a Saturday night. After the musical portion of the evening was complete, the members devoted themselves to "the habit of proceeding... to a nearby drinking place for two or three hours."²⁷ Membership was limited to those who could play an instrument, though occasionally guests were allowed who did not play. The Saturday Night Club was a fixture of Mencken's life, meeting every week until his death. Among its members were "first-rate professionals and some amateurs hardly worth shooting," and any other number of "distinguished university, governmental or ecclesiastical dignitaries."²⁸

Mencken also took time off to go on a number of vacations. He traveled to Jamaica during 1900, and to Europe a number of times to recover from the effects of too much work or to help ease his respiratory system. These vacations added color to his life – his travels both to Europe and to Jamaica gave him both time to recuperate and, in the case of his European trip, gave him a book length work to publish.²⁹

Mencken's book publishing career had begun in 1903, with *Ventures into Verse*.³⁰ Mencken's poetic skills did not win him large acclaim, though the book did receive at least one favorable review. Mencken's other early effort (1904) was a critical work on the plays of George Bernard Shaw, one of his favorite dramatists. Mencken also wrote an analysis

²⁵ Enoch Pratt Free Library (Corp. Author), *H.L. Mencken Room and Collection*, accessed December 21, 2006, available at <http://www.epfl.net/slr/hum/mencken.html>; internet.

²⁶ Mencken, *Newspaper Days*, 218-221.

²⁷ Hobson, 78.

²⁸ Mencken, *Heathen Days*, 90.

²⁹ Mencken's trip to Jamaica is recorded in *Newspaper Days*, 76-93. Earlier adventures in Europe – before World War I – are recorded in _____, George Jean Nathan, Willard Huntington Wright, *Europe After 8:15* (New York: John Lane, 1914). His later adventures in Europe are covered in _____, *Heathen Days*, 239-277.

³⁰ _____, *Ventures into Verse* (New York: Marshall, Beek and Gordon, 1903)

and partial translation of the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (1908), a then-unknown figure in the country whose works influenced Mencken's own thoughts enormously.³¹

Once Mencken began publishing books, the pace rapidly accelerated. In 1910 came *What You Ought to Know About Your Baby*, a tome that Mencken ghost-wrote for a pediatrician, and *Men Versus the Man*, an epistolary debate with a Socialist.³² In 1912 came *The Artist: A Drama Without Words*.³³ 1914 brought *Europe After 8:15*.³⁴ 1916 brought two works: *A Book of Burlesques* and *A Little Book in C Major*.³⁵ 1917 brought Mencken's first widely received work, *A Book of Prefaces*, and then in 1918 *Damn! A Book of Calumny* and *In Defense of Women*.³⁶

Both Mencken's personal interests and his book-length works would come to dominate the period before and during World War I. Growing anti-German sentiment in the country caused Mencken to cease publication of the "Free Lance" in 1915, and drew him more and more towards his scholarly interests and away from controversy. Mencken was particularly pro-German during the lead-up to the war. His own personal relations and distant German heritage led him to believe that the German cause was immensely important and on the side of right. Mencken was, in fact, in Germany as the war unfolded, and owing largely to the bungling of the German ambassador, barely escaped the country as the war began.³⁷

Mencken's pro-German sentiments came under fire from any number of detractors. George Creel and his Committee on Public Information began a file on Mencken, adding sundry details about him and his supposedly seditious activities. Mencken remained largely silent in any public forums. Instead, he devoted much time to his clubs – he helped with a Saturday Night Club composition entitled "I am a 100 %

³¹ _____, *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, (reprint, Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1967) and _____, *George Bernard Shaw: His Plays* (reprint, New York: Glaser, 1969).

³² Mencken's baby book, though not published under his name, was actually read widely for a number of years. While he was hardly Dr. Spock, Mencken's book contained sound advice for the time. It has been reprinted lately as Howard Markel and Frank A. Oski, ed. *The H.L. Mencken Baby Book* (Philadelphia: Hanley and Belfus, 1990.) For the debate with the Socialist, see H.L. Mencken and Robert La Monte, *Men Versus the Man* (New York: Holt, 1910.)

³³ H.L. Mencken, *The Artist: A Drama Without Words*, (Boston: John Luce, 1912).

³⁴ Mencken, et al., *Europe After 8:15*.

³⁵ H.L. Mencken, *A Book of Burlesques* (New York: John Lane, 1916). and _____, *A Little Book in C Major* (New York: John Lane, 1916).

³⁶ _____, *A Book of Prefaces* (New York: Knopf, 1917) and _____, *Damn! A Book of Calumny* (New York: Knopf, 1918) and _____, *In Defense of Women* (New York: Philip Goodman, 1918).

³⁷ Rodgers, *Mencken: The American Iconoclast*, 163-174.

American, God Dama!"³⁸ and to a new scholarly project that interested him, a study of the differentiation between the English spoken in England and that spoken in America.

The resulting work, *The American Language*, published in 1919, would be revised numerous times and would eventually become Mencken's best-selling work. A review of the differences and a history of the use of English words in America, *The American Language* served two purposes in Mencken's mind. First, it "showed the professors," who had disparaged Mencken for his lack of scholarship and his combative nature. Second, and most importantly, it brought Mencken a new status as a scholar of American culture and language and gained him a new level of respect among many intellectuals of the country. While it was clear that Mencken could write with the best of them, *The American Language* served also to prove that Mencken could interpret sources and that he had delved deeply into the cultural fabric of the country. *The American Language* made Mencken that much more believable – and he would be widely believed in the decade to come.³⁹

Many called the 1920's the "Age of Mencken." Mencken, now entering his 40's, was probably the most widely-read journalist of his era. Walter Lippman called him in 1926 "the most powerful personal influence on this whole generation of educated people."⁴⁰

Several factors were important. Mencken was among the first vanguard of syndicated columnists, a new and revolutionary feature of papers of the 1920's. Syndication was yet one more effect of the "mass culture" that developed during the 1920's, and along with their automobiles, jazz music, washing machines and refrigerators, Mencken's editorials were now even more easily attainable in the local newspaper.

Yet more, Mencken's most productive years coincided with a time when at least some of the country moved largely in a more politically and economically conservative direction and a more socially liberal direction. Mencken hardly agreed with such moral reforms as prohibition - he was a staunch libertarian who believed that government interference in any sort of private enterprise was inherently wrong. More, he believed that governments should be composed of a "civilized minority" whose interests were in elevating civilization to its highest reaches.⁴¹

Mencken's irreverent tone and ideological stance made him a hero of some and a pariah of others. Mencken always took particular delight in pitting the rural against the urban. Using phrases such as "Cow State John the Baptist" and creating any number of "belts," from the "hog cholera and no-more-scrub bulls belt" to the infamous "bible belt," Mencken thought that the country folk were responsible for foisting "all of the

³⁸ Mencken wrote that the tune "radiates wool and it reeks with brrrrrrr." Mencken, *Heathen Days*, 92.

³⁹ As noted in the text, Mencken's *The American Language* was originally published in 1919. It went through revisions by his own pen in 1921, 1923, 1936, 1945, 1948 and by other scholars working through Mencken's notes in 1963. This is drawn from _____, *The American Language*, (New York: Knopf, 1989), i-vii.

⁴⁰ Walter Lippman, "Review of *Notes on Democracy*," *Saturday Review of Literature*, December 11, 1926.

⁴¹ Mencken's best articulation of his sometimes contradictory political philosophy was written in *Notes on Democracy*, published in 1926. _____, *Notes on Democracy*, (New York: Knopf, 1926).

nonsensical legislation which makes the United States a buffoon among the great nations.” He put it simply that “all the benefit that a New Yorker gets out of Kansas is no more than what he might get out of Saskatchewan, the Argentine pampas, or Siberia. But New York to a Kansas is not only a place where he may get drunk, look at dirty shows and buy bogus antiques; it is also a place where he may enforce his dunghill ideas on his betters.”⁴²

Mencken fought many battles in the 1920’s, but he chose them carefully. The one that has received the most attention is the Scopes trial, but the more important personal battle during the decade involved a short story, “Hatrack,” about a prostitute, published under his aegis in the *American Mercury*. It set a battle between the Society for the Suppression of Vice headed by Anthony Comstock and the publishers of the *Mercury*, and Mencken himself. Mencken’s publication of the story led to the issue being banned from the mails and an eventual trial. The mails of the issue were first blocked in Boston where the Society for the Suppression of Vice was particularly strong, part of the expression “banned in Boston.” After Mencken successfully won the trial, he appeared at Harvard and was cheered wildly as he attempted to make a speech about the event.⁴³

“Hatrack” represented a triumph of free speech for Mencken, but the greater ideological battle of the Scopes trial proved more glamorous and in tune with Mencken’s ideals. The trial of John Scopes for teaching evolution in the Tennessee public schools was an irresistible draw for Mencken. The trial was “invented by a man named George Rappelyea, a New Yorker who was the manager of a nearby coal mine. He suggested to the yokels of Dayton that jugging Scopes would get the town a lot of free advertising – and neglected to mention that it would be unfavorable.” Mencken immediately argued that any effort to find Scopes innocent would be foolish – it would “put a quick end to the show, and leave the defense with an empty victory. The thing to do... was to use the case to make Tennessee forever infamous, and to that end the sacrifice of Scopes would be a small matter.”⁴⁴

Mencken’s activities at the Scopes trial made him a national celebrity. Mencken’s dispatches from Dayton, including his famous “The Hills of Zion,” were artfully crafted descriptions of the town, its inhabitants, and the show that unfolded in the Tennessee hills. Mencken’s pen worked furiously at Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan, dramatically illustrating Mencken’s idea of the villainry of Bryan and the clearly civilized tone of Darrow.⁴⁵

Further cementing Mencken’s status as a star of the 1920s were the publication of the three books that Mencken considered his finest and most fundamental work: *Treatise on Right and Wrong*, *Treatise on the Gods*, and *Notes on Democracy*.⁴⁶ This trilogy, at least to

⁴² _____, *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, 199, 363.

⁴³ Rodgers, *Mencken: The American Iconoclast*, 300-305.

⁴⁴ Mencken, *Thirty Five Years of Newspaper Work*, 137. Mencken’s assertions are a bit controversial – but he clearly was a key player in the case. He even convinced the *Evening Sun* to pay for Scopes defense.

⁴⁵ Rodgers, *The Impossible H.L. Mencken*, 562-608.

⁴⁶ H.L. Mencken, *Treatise on Right and Wrong*, (New York: Knopf, 1934) _____, *Treatise on the Gods* (New York: Knopf, 1930), and _____, *Notes on Democracy*.

Mencken's mind, explained fully Mencken's basic philosophies on all of the important issues in life – morality, government and religion. The three books reflected the influences of Nietzsche on Mencken's philosophy and added his own spin to each of the subjects. The most widely sold and read, *Notes on Democracy*, produced a critique by Walter Lippman which called him "this Holy Terror from Baltimore (who) is splendidly and exultantly and contagiously alive. He calls you a swine, and an imbecile, and he increases your will to live."⁴⁷ While the other two works were not nearly as widely read, each was important in outlining Mencken's basic idea of the way the cosmos worked and how it should work.

But more than that, the books symbolized Mencken's transition as a critic. Mencken's first role was that of theater critic (Shaw), then literary critic (*Smart Set*), a scholar – and critic – of language, and then a "critic of ideas," one whom deconstructed the intellectual basis behind life and art. This trilogy symbolized his transition from a critic of individual works of art to a one of larger significance, a status that he attempted to maintain for the rest of his life. It was this status that cemented him as one of the mainstays of the 1920s.⁴⁸

Mencken's philosophy was perfect for the 1920s – but harder times did not weather his ideas well. When the stock market crashed in late 1929, Mencken was not visibly affected – in fact, he had argued violently that the stock market boom was dangerous and should not be allowed to continue. But mounting evidence of the depression left Mencken silent in his weekly columns. He continued in much the same vein as always, criticizing whatever figure might have been in power at the moment and writing long tributes to anything he felt like.

But as the depression mounted, Mencken looked on as most of the country did with something akin to despair. He thought and wrote that the country might simply get itself back on track by simple hard work and virtue – attributes that he had praised since the beginning of his career.

While Mencken hardly realized it, the end of his wide influence and amazing national power came with the Depression and the election of Franklin Roosevelt. Early in Roosevelt's term, he wrote cautious praise for the president: "He is not an inflated pedagogue with a messianic delusion (as Wilson was), but a highly civilized fellow, and there is a good deal of humor in him." Still, Mencken, thought, it was a "time to be wary" – but Mencken rarely trusted any figure in power.⁴⁹

Mencken turned strongly against Roosevelt after an incident at the Gridiron club. Called on to give dueling speeches in a friendly exchange of blasts, Mencken prepared a speech that was generally thought by those in attendance to have been rather mild. But Roosevelt attacked Mencken viciously, using a piece that Mencken had written previously on the ineptitude of journalists. Though the speeches have never been recorded, most at the dinner agreed that Roosevelt's remarks were out of character and

⁴⁷ Lippman.

⁴⁸ For Mencken's own view of his criticism, see Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, 429-441. An excellent secondary work of analysis on Mencken's literary work is Nick Nolte's *H.L. Mencken: Literary Critic* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1966). Nolte's analysis is detailed and written in a flowing style. For a quantitative analysis of Mencken's decline as literary critic, see Kloefkorn.

⁴⁹ *Baltimore Evening Sun*, 13 March 1933.

out of tune with the feel of the evening. Mencken quickly penned a reply, but no time was allowed for it and he was thus not allowed to deliver it. He did, however, gracefully shake FDR's hand afterwards, gaining a round of applause from bystanders.⁵⁰

Mencken's career in the 1930s can almost be traced on an opposite arc of Franklin Roosevelt's. As FDR rose in the public's perception, Mencken quickly declined. Mencken began to write long and protracted arguments against the New Deal, digging up obscure examples from the history of other countries to illustrate the perils of such government largesse.⁵¹ By the middle of the 1930's, Mencken had become alienated from much of the American public and from many of his friends. Mencken's hatred of FDR descended to a rabid preoccupation. Few were even allowed to mention Roosevelt in Mencken's presence for fear he might descend into a sputtering rage.⁵²

Alienation from his longtime friend George Jean Nathan also caused Mencken much grief. Mencken also had a falling out with his longtime friend Theodore Dreiser, whose career Mencken helped to further during his days as editor of the *Smart Set* and the *American Mercury*.⁵³

Though Mencken's personal life was hardly rosy during this period, there was one bright spot: Sara Haardt. Mencken had always courted a number of women, including a woman named Marion Bloom and the movie star Aileen Pringle. But Mencken never seriously entertained the notion of marrying either. But then came Haardt, a young writer from Alabama that Mencken found "a hell of a psychologist," among other things. Haardt was an aspiring writer that Mencken found charming and considered a fine prize.⁵⁴

Sara Haardt was, to Mencken, his perfect match. Unfortunately, Haardt suffered from tuberculosis, and was not expected to live beyond her mid-20s. Mencken worked diligently to care for her, using many of his acquaintances at Johns Hopkins to further her treatment. Through this, the two developed a warm relationship that eventually led to their marriage on August 27, 1930.⁵⁵

Mencken had never been particularly fond of marriage, declaring that "no man is genuinely happy, married, who has to drink worse whiskey than he used to drink when he was single." Thus, many questioned him as to his sudden reversal on taking a wife. He could answer only that he had perhaps been wrong.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Terry Teachout, *The Skeptic: A Life of H.L. Mencken* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 3-7.

⁵¹ Mencken referred to politics in France in 1845, which, at least by his estimation, bore a striking resemblance to those of his own time. See *Baltimore Evening Sun*, 31 December 1934.

⁵² Hobson, 385-388.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 243-245.

⁵⁴ Marion Elizabeth Rodgers, ed., *Mencken & Sara: A Life in Letters* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987), 122.

⁵⁵ Rodgers, *Mencken: The American Iconoclast*, 349.

⁵⁶ Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, 58.

Mencken called his years with Sara the “happiest of my life.” Unfortunately, Sara’s illnesses kept recurring and finally became worse and worse. She succumbed to them on May 31, 1935. Mencken never entertained the notion of remarrying, and in fact never carried on any sort of relationship with a woman after Sara’s death.⁵⁷

The 1930’s were a decade that simply wore Mencken down. FDR’s rise to power irritated him mightily, and ongoing problems at the *Sun* papers finally convinced him that “it would be eternally impossible to make a really first-rate newspaper of the *Sun*.”⁵⁸ Mencken took 1938 to travel to Germany and to the Holy Land for what he thought (presciently) would be his final trip abroad.⁵⁹

On this trip, as usual, political and racial issues were at the front of Mencken’s concern. Mencken’s stance toward the Jews is, to say the least, complicated. Though many have charged him with anti-Semitism, particularly after his diary was published in 1989, Mencken wrote several editorials during the period leading up to World War II, saying, “It is to be hoped that the poor Jews now being robbed and mauled in Germany will not take too seriously the plans of various politicians to rescue them.”⁶⁰

But Mencken’s trip to Germany and the Holy Land still did not change his predictable stance against the United States’ entry into World War II. Mencken, much as in World War I, firmly believed that England had duped the United States into entering the war, a sentiment that made him again extremely unpopular for the duration of World War II.

Again Mencken turned to other pursuits during wartime. He began writing a series of articles for the *New Yorker*, reminiscing of his childhood days in Baltimore. The articles, written in rosy, glowing tones of the past with plenty of Mencken’s signature humor thrown in, eventually were collected into a book, *Happy Days*, which provides a great deal of the material for most biographers of Mencken’s youth. Eventually, Mencken wrote reminiscences of his early days as a reporter, compiling them into *Newspaper Days*, and a final set of reminiscences came together in *Heathen Days*. The three constituted Mencken’s fit-for-public-consumption notion of his own life and activities.⁶¹

Mencken also worked diligently at revising *The American Language*. The initial publication of the work brought much scholarly praise, and some have even credited the book with beginning the study of American as a separate entity from English. Mencken took advantage of his position as the “first” scholar in the field to significantly add to his work and to further cement his status.

By the time World War II began, Mencken’s spirits had lifted a great deal. He gradually tapered off work at the *Sun*, finally relinquishing day-to-day activities in 1940. Still, though, he kept writing editorials and columns for the newspaper. In 1948, even as

⁵⁷ Rodgers, *Mencken: The American Iconoclast*, 417.

⁵⁸ Mencken, *Thirty-Five Years of Newspaper Work*, 3.

⁵⁹ This journey was recorded in _____, *Heathen Days*, 256-277.

⁶⁰ *Baltimore Evening Sun*, 27 November 1938.

⁶¹ I have drawn heavily on these three sources, mainly because of their clear first-hand accounts of Mencken’s life. Clearly, these sources contain some bias, but are so well written that it can be difficult to resist them. I have used other biographers to fill details untold in Mencken’s three books.

he was 68 years old, Mencken covered both national political conventions. He was a fixture of the convention, and drew much attention from younger reporters whom he amazed by both working and drinking late into the night.⁶²

But 1948 would bring what was essentially the end of Mencken's writing career. On the afternoon of November 23, Mencken went to his secretary's house to update her on some manuscripts and began babbling incoherently. Mencken's doctor was summoned and he was rushed to the hospital – the victim of a cruel stroke.⁶³

The verdict was not good. Mencken had been suffering over the past few years from a series of strokes. This last one was the most crippling yet, and the doctors were unsure if he would live. But Mencken did survive – and that was the worst part. The Mencken that woke up in 1948 from that stroke was an incredibly different man. The stroke had robbed him of virtually all ability to write or read, and his state depressed him terribly. He talked of killing himself for a while and had to be restrained.⁶⁴

Gradually, Mencken regained some of his composure. He held great hopes for a full recovery that would never come. He worked diligently at every exercise the doctors prescribed, eventually regaining some of his lost faculties. He did finally regain enough to be able with the help of his secretary Rosalind Lohrfinck to work on several collections of his work and to dictate notes. Mencken spent much of the last years of his life collecting and organizing his papers for future researchers. Eventually these efforts would result in Mencken's last book, published posthumously – *H.L. Mencken's Minority Report*.⁶⁵

Few authors have so carefully managed their future presence and interpretation as Mencken. His papers, diaries and private reminiscences came with a carefully worded and written will that did not allow the release of certain materials for 15, 25 and some for 35 years. Thus, Mencken did two things: he allowed himself to indulge in his own subjective judgments of the people around him, and he ensured that he would be a topic of scholarly interest for many years to come. When the last of his papers were released in 1991, they were accompanied by a flurry of scholarly interest. Much primary work on Mencken's life has been published, including his own diary, his correspondence and his letters to and from Sara.

Mencken's role in American society during the period from 1900-1945 cannot be easily estimated. He was a cultural force. His ideas were clearly expressed, and while they were often contradictory or outlandish, they had the ability to instantly polarize one for or against him. Seldom does one, reading Mencken's essays, find themselves drifting off.

Mencken's social commentary on the era ranged all over the place. Underlying them all was a certain coda, though. He stated it once as this:

I believe in the complete freedom of thought and speech...

I believe in the capacity of man to conquer his world, and to find out what it is made of, and how it is run. I believe in the reality of progress.

⁶² Rodgers, *Mencken: The American Iconoclast*, 516-526.

⁶³ Hobson, 501.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 502-508.

⁶⁵ H.L. Mencken, *H.L. Mencken's Minority Report* (New York: Knopf, 1956).

I - But the whole thing, after all, may be put very simply. I believe that it is better to tell the truth than to lie. I believe that it is better to be free than to be a slave. And I believe that it is better to know than be ignorant.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ _____, *Mencken's Creed*, accessed December 21, 2006 available from <http://www.io.com/~gibbonsb/mencken.html>; internet.