

180 QUOTATIONS



H. L. Mencken

(1880-1956)

Henry Louis Mencken—called the “Sage of Baltimore”—was a journalist, literary historian, linguist, and the most influential social critic of the early 20th century. Self-educated and remarkably versatile, he was a Libertarian champion of free speech, independent thought, beer and good cigars. He wrote for *The Baltimore Sun*, was an editor at *Smart Set* and a co-founder of the *American Mercury*—opinionated, belligerent, iconoclastic, acerbic, witty, incisive, brutal—the opposite of genteel or Politically Correct. He got himself arrested in Boston to protest the censorship of his magazine. He coined the terms “booboisie” and “Bible belt” in his attacks on censorship, conformity, newspapers, creationism, religion, politicians, Puritans and Prohibition. Mencken attacked traditional Victorianism with the passion of a moral crusader. He criticized democracy for elevating inferior men above those better qualified, like Hugh H. Brackenridge in his satire *Modern Chivalry* (1792-1805). Like Cooper in *The Leatherstocking Saga* he believed in a “natural aristocracy.” He wrote essays, plays, fiction, satires, books on Shaw and Nietzsche, as well as *The American Language*, and a dictionary of insults directed at himself by readers. In his literary criticism he promoted Theodore Dreiser the Naturalist, Sinclair Lewis the satirical Realist, and Ayn Rand the Capitalist. As a wit, Mencken is in the tradition of Mark Twain and Ambrose Bierce.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, education, autobiographical, human nature, men, women, love, men and women, marriage, adultery, alimony, morality, Jews, lynching in his state, honor, idealism, justice, judge, reform, progress, government, Communism, freedom, war, Democracy, politics, newspapers, art, American literature, writing, criticism, Victorian Political Correctness, adverse influence of Puritanism, religion, life, cynicism, old age, death, epitaph:

YOUTH

I never smoked cigarettes until I was nine.

EDUCATION

A platitude is an idea that is admitted to be true by everyone, and that is not true.

For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple and wrong.

Let’s not burn the universities yet. After all, the damage they do might be worse.

We are here and it is now. Further than that, all human knowledge is moonshine.

A professor must have a theory as a dog must have fleas.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

It is inaccurate to say that I hate everything. I am strongly in favor of common sense, common honesty, and common decency. This makes me forever ineligible for public office.

I never lecture, not because I am shy or a bad speaker, but simply because I detest the sort of people who go to lectures and don't want to meet them.

I write in order to attain that feeling of tension relieved and function achieved which a cow enjoys on giving milk.

HUMAN NATURE

Man is a beautiful machine that works very badly.

Don't overestimate the decency of the human race.

It is a sin to believe evil of others, but it is seldom a mistake.

It is even harder for the ape to believe he descended from man.

The chief value of money lies in the fact that one lives in a world in which it is overestimated.

The capacity of human beings to bore one another seems to be vastly greater than that of any other animal.

The most costly of all follies is to believe passionately in the palpably not true. It is the chief occupation of mankind.

Have you ever watched a crab on the shore crawling backward in search of the Atlantic Ocean, and missing? That's the way the mind of man operates.

MEN

One may believe in an idea absolutely, but not in a man.

All men are frauds. The only difference between them is that some admit it. I myself deny it.

Before a man speaks it is always safe to assume that he is a fool. After he speaks it is seldom necessary to assume it.

The one permanent emotion of the inferior man is fear—fear of the unknown, the complex, the inexplicable. What he wants above everything else is safety.

Every man is his own hell.

WOMEN

To be a woman is in itself a terrible experience.

When women kiss it always reminds one of prize fighters shaking hands.

Women always excel men in that sort of wisdom which comes from experience.

No matter how long he lives, no man ever becomes as wise as the average woman of forty-eight.

Women have simple tastes. They get pleasure out of the conversation of children in arms and men in love.

LOVE

Love is the triumph of imagination over intelligence.

Love is like war: easy to begin but very hard to stop.

Love is the delusion that one woman differs from another.

To be in love is to mistake an ordinary young woman for a goddess.

A man always remembers his first love with special tenderness, but after that he begins to bunch them.

Love is an emotion that is based on an opinion of women that is impossible for those who have had any experience with them.

MEN AND WOMEN

Temptation is a woman's weapon and a man's excuse.

In the duel of sex, woman fights from a dreadnought and man from an open raft.

Men have a much better time of it than women. For one thing, they marry later, for another thing, they die earlier.

The only really happy folk are married women and single men.

MARRIAGE

[Marriage is] the end of hope.

A man may be a fool and not know it, but not if he is married.

Marriage is a wonderful institution, but who would want to live in an institution?

Bachelors know more about women than married men; if they didn't, they'd be married too.

If women believed in their husbands they would be a good deal happier and also a good deal more foolish.

Our friends seldom profit us but they make us feel safe. Marriage is a scheme to accomplish exactly that same end.

No married man is genuinely happy if he has to drink worse whiskey than he used to drink when he was single.

Strike an average between what a woman thinks of her husband a month before she married him and what she thinks of him a year afterward, and you will have the truth about him.

No matter how happily a woman may be married, it always pleases her to discover that there is a nice man who wishes that she were not.

Husbands never become good; they merely become proficient.

ADULTERY

Adultery is the application of democracy to love.

ALIMONY

Alimony is the ransom that the happy pay to the devil.

MORALITY

Conscience is a mother-in-law whose visit never ends.

Puritanism is the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.

Immorality is the morality of those who are having a better time.

Self-respect is the secure feeling that no one, as yet, is suspicious.

Conscience is the inner voice that warns us that someone might be looking.

A prohibitionist is the sort of man one couldn't care to drink with, even if he drank.

One may no more live in the world without picking up the moral prejudices of the world than one will be able to go to hell without perspiring.

JEWS

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.

Why shouldn't the United States take in a couple hundred thousand of them, or even all of them? [Letter to President Franklin Roosevelt]

LYNCHING IN HIS STATE

Not a single bigwig came forward in the emergency, though the whole town knew what was afoot. Any one of a score of such bigwigs might have halted the crime, if only by threatening to denounce its perpetrators, but none spoke. So Williams was duly hanged, burned and mutilated.

HONOR

The difference between a moral man and a man of honor is that the latter regrets a discreditable act, even when it has worked and he has not been caught.

Honor is simply the morality of the superior man.

IDEALISM

An idealist is one who, on noticing that roses smell better than cabbage, concludes that they will also make better soup.

It is not materialism that is the chief curse of the world, as pastors teach, but idealism. Men get into trouble by taking their visions and hallucinations too seriously.

JUSTICE

What men value in this world is not rights but privileges.

Injustice is relatively easy to bear; what stings is justice.

JUDGE

A judge is a law student who marks his own examination papers.

REFORM

When fanatics are on top there is no limit to oppression.

The urge to save humanity is almost always a front for the urge to rule.

The common argument that crime is caused by poverty is a kind of slander on the poor.

Nearly all Americans, down to the Civil War, were poor.

PROGRESS

Unquestionably there is progress. The average American now pays out twice as much in taxes as he formerly got in wages.

GOVERNMENT

Every decent man is ashamed of the government he lives under.

I believe that all government is evil, and that trying to improve it is largely a waste of time.

The most dangerous man to any government is the man who is able to think things out...without regard to the prevailing superstitions and taboos. Almost inevitably he comes to the conclusion that the government he lives under is dishonest, insane, intolerable.

COMMUNISM

Communism, like any other revealed religion, is largely made up of prophecies.

You protest, and with justice, each time Hitler jails an opponent, but you forget that Stalin and company have jailed and murdered a thousand times as many. [Letter to Socialist Upton Sinclair]

FREEDOM

I believe in only one thing: liberty; but I do not believe in liberty enough to want to force it upon anyone.

All government, of course, is against liberty.

We must be willing to pay a price for freedom.

WAR

To die for an idea; it is unquestionably noble. But how much nobler it would be if men died for ideas that were true!

War will never cease until babies begin to come into the world with larger cerebrums and smaller adrenal glands.

DEMOCRACY

Giving a man a vote has no more made men wise and free than Christianity has made them good.

I confess I enjoy democracy immensely. It is incomparably idiotic, and hence incomparably amusing.

Democracy is the theory that the common people know what they want, and deserve to get it good and hard.

Democracy is only a dream: it should be put in the same category as Arcadia, Santa Claus, and Heaven.

Democracy is also a form of worship. It is the worship of jackals by jackasses.

Democracy is a patriotic belief in the collective wisdom of individual ignorance.

Democracy is the art and science of running the circus from the monkey cage.

We move toward a lofty ideal. On some great and glorious day the plain folks of the land will reach their heart's desire at last, and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron.

POLITICS

A good politician is quite as unthinkable as an honest burglar.

Every election is a sort of advance auction sale of stolen goods.

A politician is an animal which can sit on a fence and yet keep both ears to the ground.

If a politician found he had cannibals among his constituents, he would promise them missionaries for dinner.

The whole aim of practical politics is to keep the populace alarmed (and hence clamorous to be led to safety) by menacing it with an endless series of hobgoblins, all of them imaginary.

NEWSPAPERS

A newspaper is a device for making the ignorant more ignorant and the crazy crazier.

Nobody ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American people.

ART

The opera is to music what a bawdy house is to a cathedral.

Opera in English is, in the main, just about as sensible as baseball in Italian.

It is impossible to imagine Goethe or Beethoven being good at billiards or golf.

AMERICAN LITERATURE

[Reading *Huckleberry Finn* was] the most stupendous event in my life.

It is, indeed, precisely in the works of such men as Mark Twain that one finds the best proof of the Puritan influence in American letters...not only in the harsh Calvinistic fables of Hawthorne and the pious gurglings of Longfellow, but also in the poetry of Bryant, the tea-party niceness of Howells...

We have produced so far but one genuine wit—Ambrose Bierce—and, save to a small circle, he remains unknown today. Our great humourists, including even Mark Twain, have had to take protective colouration, whether willingly or unwillingly, from the prevailing ethical foliage...they have done battle, not against, but *for* Philistinism—and Philistinism is no more than another name for Puritanism.

To wade through the books of such characteristic American fictioneers as Frances Hodgson Burnett, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, F. Hopkinson Smith, Alice Brown, James Lane Allen, Winston Churchill, Ellen Galsgow, Gertrude Atherton and Sarah Orne Jewett is to undergo an experience that is almost terrible. The flow of words is completely purged of ideas; in place of them one finds no more than a romantic restatement of all the old platitudes and formulae.

The whole atmosphere of our literature, in William James' phrase, is "mawkish and dishwatery." Books are still judged among us, not by their form and organization as works of art, their accuracy and vividness as representations of life, their validity and perspicacity as interpretations of it, but by their conformity to the national prejudices, their accordance with set standards of niceness and propriety.

WRITING

An historian is an unsuccessful novelist.

Poetry has done enough when it charms, but prose must also convince.

Most people are unable to write because they are unable to think, and they are unable to think because they congenitally lack the equipment to do so, just as they congenitally lack the equipment to fly over the moon.

A society made up of individuals who were all capable of original thought would probably be unendurable.

CRITICISM

Criticism is prejudice made plausible.

VICTORIAN POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

Almost any printed allusion to sex may be argued against as unbecoming in a moral republic, and once it is unbecoming it is also obscene.

The Army Medical Corps, in the early part of 1918, encountered...difficulty: most newspapers refused to print its bulletins regarding venereal disease in the army.

The new Puritanism is not ascetic, but militant. Its aim is not to lift up saints but to knock down sinners. Its supreme manifestation is the vice crusade, an armed pursuit of helpless outcasts by the whole military and naval forces of the republic. Its supreme hero is [Anthony] Comstock Himself, with his pious boast that the sinners he jailed during his astounding career, if gathered into one penitential party, would have filled a train of sixty-one coaches, allowing sixty to the coach. [1917]

A novel or a play is judged among us, not by its dignity of conception, its artistic honesty, its perfection of workmanship, but almost entirely by its orthodoxy of doctrine, its platitudinousness, its usefulness as a moral tract. [Victorianism, the contemporary matriarchal form of traditional Puritanism in America, was the Political Correctness of his time.]

This was the Golden Age of euphemism...the worst inventions of the English mid-Victorians were adopted and improved. The word "woman" became a term of opprobrium, verging close upon downright libel; legs became the inimitable "limbs"; the stomach began to run from the "bosom" to the pelvic arch; pantaloons faded into "unmentionables"; the newspapers spun their parts of speech into such gossamer webs as a "statutory offence," "a house of questionable repute" and "an interesting condition."

ADVERSE INFLUENCE OF PURITANISM

The literature of the nation, even the literature of the enlightened minority, has been under harsh Puritan restraints from the beginning. [1917]

The Puritan's utter lack of aesthetic sense, his distrust of all romantic emotion, his unmatched intolerance of opposition, his unbreakable belief in his own bleak and narrow views, his savage cruelty of attack, his lust for relentless and barbarous persecution—these things have put an almost unbearable burden upon the exchange of ideas in the United States.

RELIGION

Theology is the effort to explain the unknowable in terms of the not worth knowing.

Faith may be defined briefly as an illogical belief in the occurrence of the improbable.

The chief contribution of Protestantism to human thought is its massive proof that God is a bore.

A Sunday school is a prison in which children do penance for the evil conscience of their parents.

A church is a place in which gentlemen who have never been to heaven brag about it to persons who will never get there.

Say what you will about the Ten Commandments, you must always come back to the pleasant fact that there are only ten of them.

It is impossible to imagine the universe run by a wise, just and omnipotent God, but it is quite easy to imagine it run by a board of gods.

We must respect the other fellow's religion, but only in the sense and to the extent that we respect his theory that his wife is beautiful and his children smart.

It is now quite lawful for a Catholic woman to avoid pregnancy by a resort to mathematics, though she is still forbidden to resort to physics or chemistry.

An archbishop is a Christian ecclesiastic of a rank superior to that attained by Christ.

LIFE

Life is a constant oscillation between the sharp horns of dilemmas.

CYNICISM

The cynics are right nine times out of ten.

A cynic is a man who, when he smells flowers, looks around for a coffin.

It is hard to believe that a man is telling the truth when you know that you would lie if you were in his place.

OLD AGE

The older I grow the more I distrust the familiar doctrine that age brings wisdom.

Man weeps to think that he will die so soon; woman that she was born so long ago.

As the arteries grow hard, the heart grows soft.

DEATH

Time stays, we go.

Life is a dead-end street.

In every unbeliever's heart there is an uneasy feeling that, after all, he may awake and find himself immortal. This is his punishment for his unbelief. This is the agnostic's Hell.

EPITAPH

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.

