

1 **Prejudices: *Third Series* (excerpted)**

2 H.L. Mencken Critiques America

3 H.L Mencken

4 1922

5

6 There are those who... find it disagreeable-nay, impossible (to live in
7 America) and every ship that puts out from New York carries a groaning
8 cargo of them (to) anywhere to escape the great curse and atrocities that
9 make life intolerable for them at home...It is...one of my firmest beliefs...
10 that the government of the United States is ignorant, incompetent,
11 corrupt and disgusting... The (Court system) is stupid, dishonest, and
12 against all reason and equity...The foreign policy and its habitual manner
13 of dealing... with friend or foe is hypocritical, disingenuous, knavish and
14 dishonorable. And it is my fourth conviction that the American people...
15 constitute the most timorous, sniveling, poltroonish, ignominious mob of
16 serfs and goose-steppers.

lacking ability/incapable

fake, untrustworthy

fearful/cowardly/disgraceful/
blind obedience

17
18 **Why I Stay**

19 To be happy I must be:

- 20 a. wellfed, unbounded by sordid cares, at ease in Zion
- 21 b. full of a comfortable feeling of superiority to the masses of my
22 fellow-man
- 23 c. delicately and unceasingly amused according to my taste.

most basic needs/ A
promised land or ideal place

24
25 ...here a man can get a living, particularly since the war... enormously
26 easier than in any other...land.

27
28 **A Third Rate Country**

29 The United States is a commonwealth of third-rate men. It is only here
30 that (third rate men) are in full control of the state and with it all the
31 national standards. The land was peopled by...incompetents who could
32 not get on at home.

33
34 (The US) is the greatest show on earth...it is devoid of: royal
35 ceremonies, "haute politique", taking politics seriously, and lays stress
36 upon: the combats of demagogues, operations of master rogues, pursuit
37 of witches and heretics and the struggles of man to claw their way into
38 Heaven.

trendy political idea
arguments/ fanatic public
officials/villian

39
40 **Religion**

41 We have clowns in constant practice among us who are as far above the
42 clowns of any great state...things that seem void of amusement are lifted
43 to vast heights of buffoonery that contemplating them strains the midriff
44 almost to breaking. I cite an example: the worship of God. Everywhere
45 else on earth it is carried on in a solemn and dispiriting manner. In
46 England, of course, the bishops are obscene, but the average man seldom
47 gets a fair chance to laugh at and enjoy them. Every American town;
48 however small, has one of its own: a holy clerk with so fine a talent for

49 introducing the arts of jazz into the salvation of the damned that his
50 performance takes on all the gaudiness of a four-ring circus.

51

52 **Politics**

53 ...a campaign for the Presidency (is a) battle to the death between
54 Tweedledum and Tweedledee. In other lands... there are...intelligible
55 issues, coherent ideas, salient personalities... But what did [Warren G.]
56 Harding say in 1920, and what did [James] Cox reply? Who was
57 Harding anyhow, and who was Cox? Here, having perfected democracy,
58 we lift the whole combat to symbolism, to transcendentalism to
59 metaphysics. Here we load a pair of palpably tin cannons with blank
60 cartridges charged with talcum powder, and so let fly. Here one may
61 howl over the show without any uneasy reminder that it is serious, and
62 that someone may be hurt. I hold this elevation of politics to the plane of
63 undiluted comedy is peculiarly American, that nowhere else on this
64 disreputable ball has the art of the sham-battle been developed to such
65 finesse.

66

67 ...Well, here is the land of mirth. Here the buffoonery never stops. One
68 man prefers the Republic because it pays better wages than Bulgaria.
69 Another (man) because it has laws to keep him sober and his daughter
70 chaste. Another (man) because the Woolworth Building is higher than
71 the cathedral at Chartres. Me, I like it because it amuses me to my taste.
72 I never get tired of the show.

73

74

75

76

being saved from hell
flashy extravagance

prominent

flimsy metal used for toys

shameful, fake

amusement

virgin

Teacher's Guide

Name of Text: H.L. Mencken Prejudices: Third Series from H.L Mencken Critiques America (1922)

Question Composers: Katie Anderson, Janet Roberts, Johanna Sergott

Standards:

Nevada State: H3. [9-12].5, H3. [9-12].6

CCSS: R1.11-12.1, .2, .4, .5, .6, RH 11-12.1, RH 11-12.4.2, W11-12.1, .2, SL11-12.3, L11-12.4, 4.d, L11-12.5

| Text Dependent Questions | Teacher Notes and Possible Textual Evidence For Student Answers |
|--|--|
| <p>1. What four areas of American society is Mencken critiquing in the first paragraph?</p> | <p>10 - government 11 - court system 12 - foreign policy 14 - American people</p> <p>Students establish what Mencken will be critiquing in the entire piece.</p> |
| <p>2. How does Mencken justify critiquing each of the four groups?</p> | <p>Government is ignorant, incapable, corrupt, disgusting Court System is stupid, dishonest, against all reason and equity Foreign Policy is habitually dishonest, knavish and dishonorable American people are timorous, sniveling, poltroonish, ignominious mob of serfs and goose-steppers</p> <p>Helps students break down and analyze Mencken's argument</p> |
| <p>3. Describe Mencken's critique of American religion. What comparison does he use to make this critique?</p> | <p>37-46 Compares American religion to a circus. Shouldn't be amusing but it is. It's gaudy as a four-ring circus.</p> <p>Demonstrates Mencken's criticism of American religion</p> |

| Text Dependent Questions | Teacher Notes and Possible Textual Evidence For Student Answers |
|---|---|
| <p>4. Tweedledum and Tweedledee are fictional characters from Lewis Carroll’s <i>Alice in Wonderland</i>. The names are synonymous for any two people who look and act in identical ways. Why does the author use this imagery to describe the presidential campaign of 1820?</p> | <p>Lines 48-59 Neither candidate is worthy, they are ineffective (talcum powder imagery), they are fake, comedic</p> <p>Demonstrates Mencken’s criticism of the American political system</p> |
| <p>5. Mencken uses the words symbolism, transcendentalism, and metaphysics to express how abstract and non-concrete politics are. What textual evidence and figurative language does he employ to support this idea of American politics?</p> | <p>Textual 49/50 – in other lands there are intelligible issues, coherent ideas, salient personalities 57 – undiluted comedy 57/58 – nowhere else on this disreputable ball has the art of the sham-battle been developed</p> <p>Figurative 53/55 – uses cheap/powerless materials</p> <p>Shows how the author demonstrates ineffectual nature of American politics</p> |
| <p>6. Contrast Mencken’s reasons for why he stays in the United States to the common man’s reasons for remaining. What tone does the author strike when giving these reasons?</p> | <p>Mencken 18-20 stays well fed, basic needs met 65 – it amuses him</p> <p>Common Man 61-65 Better wages, sober, daughter is chaste, national superiority</p> <p>Although couched in his sarcasm, provides evidence for the counterclaim</p> |
| <p>7. Mencken compares America to a circus several times throughout the document. Cite the text where he does so.</p> | <p>31 – Greatest show on earth 37 – clowns 39 – buffoonery 46 – four-ring circus 65/66 – never get tired of the show</p> <p>Prepares students for prompt</p> |

Writing Prompt:

In *Prejudices: Third Series*, Mencken compares American society to a four ring circus, yet, he chooses to stay. Using reasoning and evidence from the text write two paragraphs addressing Mencken’s argument.

1. Paragraph 1: Use reasoning and evidence from the text to support his claim that America is a four ring circus.
2. Paragraph 2: Use reasoning and evidence from the text identifying Mencken’s decision to stay in America.

Checklist identifying key points that will assist in measuring student success and or difficulty with the close reading and/or writing prompt.

| America is a Four Ring Circus/Problems with American Society | Why Mencken Stays |
|--|--|
| 9-16: Government: intolerable, ignorant, incompetent, corrupt, disgusting, Court System: stupid, Foreign Policy: hypocritical, American People” timorous.... | 18-26: well fed, care free, a promised land, feeling of superiority, amused, easily makes a living. |
| 28-32: A Third Rate Country, run by incompetents, stresses combats of demagogues, witch hunts | 28-38: Opportunity for success, new beginnings, “The Greatest Show on Earth,” entertaining politics, fanatics, trendy politics |
| 40-50: Religion: is a buffoonery, lacks “solemn and dispiriting manner” | 40-50: Religion: laughable, entertaining, artistic, gaudy- like a four ring circus |
| 52-65: Politics: other countries debate intelligible, salient, coherent issues | 52-65: Politics: becomes symbolic, metaphysical, transcendental, comedic |
| | 67-72: A land of mirth , never ending buffoonery, better pay, chastity, amusement |