

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
1. What four areas of American society is Mencken critiquing in the first paragraph?	<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>
2. How does Mencken justify critiquing each of the four groups?	<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>
3. Describe Mencken's critique of American religion. What comparison does he use to make this critique?	<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><b>Textual</b>  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><b>Figurative</b>  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><b>Mencken</b>  18-20 stays well fed, basic needs met  65 – it amuses him</p> <p><b>Common Man</b>  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.**

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