THE LITERARY CRITICISM OF H. L. MENCKEN

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This study reviews H. L. Mencken's criticism of fiction, poetry, and drama. Although Mencken's role in liberating American literature from the bonds of the genteel tradition has been generally acknowledged, it is commonly alleged that he was no literary critic but a mere reviewer who engaged primarily in polemics. Further it is said that he lacked standards, taste, and judgment. The thesis of this paper is that Mencken was a better critic than he is credited with being, that he was unusually discerning in his judgment of the fiction of his time, and that his criteria are clearly stated in various of his writings. It is conceded, however, that his taste in poetry was limited and that his contribution to dramatic criticism was not greatly significant.

It is argued that Mencken's early enthusiasm for writers who are today considered among the best of the realistic-naturalistic tradition gives proof of his judgment and taste. The praise which he gave to Twain and Conrad is cited as well as the recognition which he accorded Willa Cather, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. His championship of Dreiser provides further evidence of his discernment and of his willingness to combat popular and genteel taste.
Mencken's criticism of drama and poetry is reviewed, but no claim is made for his having unusual discrimination in these fields. It is stated that his early writing on Shaw, Ibsen, and other European dramatists helped to give them a broader audience in this country and that he contributed to the recognition of Eugene O'Neill. An even slighter claim is made for Mencken as a critic of poetry. He is shown to have appreciated the verse of Wilde, Kipling, Bridges, Hardy, and the early Pound but to have had more interest in Lizette Woodworth Reese than in Robert Frost or Edwin Arlington Robinson.

This study recognizes limitations in Mencken's taste and in his practice of criticism—a poverty of analysis, a narrow concept of poetry, a conservatism which kept him from appreciating many of the innovations of his time. But it claims for him unusual perception as a critic of fiction as shown by his early praise of writers whom we today consider as eminent. And it asserts that he made an enviable record in that most difficult of tasks—the day-to-day judgment of new writers and new works.
THE LITERARY CRITICISM OF H. L. MENCKEN

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The last few years have brought a spate of books about Henry Mencken. William Nolte's *H. L. Mencken: Literary Critic* (1964), Sara Mayfield's *The Constant Circle: H. L. Mencken and His Friends* (1968), and Carl Bode's *Mencken* (1969) shed light both on his life and work. In addition there is Guy Forgue's book in French, *H. L. Mencken: the Man, the Work, the Influence* (1967), which Edmund Wilson terms as superior to any study by an American.\(^1\) It seems that there has been a revival of interest in this Baltimore newspaper man and editor. However, it is not as if he had been at any time forgotten, for a respectable number of his works have stayed in print as well as two books of selections from his writings made in the fifties and two in the sixties.\(^2\) Either he has been finding new readers or the house of Knopf has displayed notable loyalty to one of its earliest writers.

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Mencken was a remarkably versatile man: short-story writer, poet, composer, editor, literary critic, social critic, philosopher, philologist, and superb reporter of the political scene. He was something more than a jack-of-all-trades, however; for in several of these fields his accomplishments have enriched the national life. Probably his major gift was for language. He wrote with clarity and force, and few have surpassed him in power of ridicule and invective. Moreover, his book *The American Language* is considered a major contribution to scholarship.

When he came on the national scene as editor of the *Smart Set* and later of the *American Mercury*, he did not restrict himself to his literary column but took as his subject the inanities of our national life and its intellectual and emotional sterility. A convinced Darwinian and a follower of Nietzsche, he held up to ridicule the excesses of a sometimes complacent and sentimental Christianity and howled with glee over the absurdities of our political life. He jeered at the fraternal orders and service clubs, the Y.M.C.A.'s, ladies' literary societies, and other instruments of social uplift. His favorite target was the "Bluenoses," the professional reformers who would dictate morality to others, but he also struck broadly at the taste and manners of the underbred, the "lumpen proletariat" or the "booboisie" as he delighted to call our solid citizens. His ridicule and epithets did not go without answer. He was assailed in
editorial columns and from pulpit and platform as a low fellow and beneath the public scorn. Some invited him to return to the Germany of his forbears, but in typical fashion he replied that the United States was too good a circus to leave.

His irreverence and iconoclasm shocked and delighted many of the immature, but also he attracted a much more solid following. A new generation of intellectuals saw our national culture much as Mencken did—provincial and, in essence, puritanical and materialistic. From their viewpoint we were aesthetically an undeveloped people; in letters our national voice was timid and thin; in music, painting, and architecture we produced pale copies of European originals. For this new generation, Mencken's *Smart Set* became a voice for young, critical America. To some it was more than this: it brought a verve and sophistication unknown to our more stolid literary journals and it brought a succession of European authors previously unpublished in this country. Unfamiliar names like Max Beerbohm, Andre Brieux, George Moore, August Strindberg, D. H. Lawrence, and William Butler Yeats were seen on its pages. Edmund Wilson in a recent *New Yorker* review has spoken of what this magazine meant to him and others.³ Ben Hecht in his autobiography said that Mencken was his university.⁴

⁴Nolte, *Mencken's Smart Set Criticism*, xxxvi.
Aside from having a part in welcoming the new and experimental from abroad, Mencken championed such American writers as Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Willa Cather when their realism was not to the taste of the professors and the genteel literary journals. He was friend and mentor to Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis and was Dreiser's defender and champion during the decades in which that author was regarded by academia as a barbarian. It was Mencken who organized the famous Dreiser protest when the "book-baiters," to use his phrase, set upon The Genius. By the mid-twentieth, he was our best known social and literary critic, and despite his raucous voice and indubitably bad manners in debate, he had earned the respect of many of his peers. Walter Lippmann called him "the most powerful personal influence on this whole generation of educated people," and The New York Times said that he was "the most powerful private citizen in America."5

Despite the continuing public interest in Mencken and the historians' recognition of him as a major figure in the literary battles that predated the First World War and continued to the advent of the Depression, he is ordinarily not considered a literary critic by his successors, but merely a reviewer who did not judge by any system of standards and was even deficient in the good taste so necessary in a critic.

5Ibid., p. xii.
For instance, Stanley Hyman wrote that "his [Mencken's] dogmatic evaluations seem almost always the product of simple ignorance."\(^6\) Van Wyck Brooks contended that "it was evident that he had the vaguest of literary standards,"\(^7\) while Edmund Wilson, one of Mencken's early admirers, characterized Mencken as a reviewer critic "... who tended to use book-reviewing as a way of putting over his own personality and his opinions on all sorts of subjects."\(^8\) Louis Kronenberger said that while Mencken was "a very good pamphleteer, he turned out to be a very bad critic."\(^9\)

Within the last five or six years this prevalent view of Mencken's literary criticism has been challenged by William H. Nolte in his *H. L. Mencken: Literary Critic* and his *H. L. Mencken's Smart Set Criticism*, and to a lesser extent by Carl R. Dolmetsch in his article "H. L. Mencken as a Critic of Poetry," which appeared in a German journal.\(^10\) In his summation of Mencken's criticism, Nolte asserts that he possessed the two necessary requirements of a good critic:


sound judgment and a discernible influence on readers and writers. Nolte maintains that "with rare exceptions ... the writers he praised have lived and the writers he condemned have died ..." and asserts that "his popularity among writers was larger than that enjoyed by any other American critic before or since."¹¹ A study of Mencken's critical pieces in his A Book of Prefaces, his Prejudices series, and other of his books and Mercury articles, and of the pieces selected by Nolte in his H. L. Mencken's Smart Set Criticism has prompted me to affirm the contention that Mencken has been notably underrated as a critic.

It is the thesis of this paper that Mencken's major literary judgments have stood up well in the light of current taste. In 1900 he asserted that Huckleberry Finn was the "greatest novel yet produced by an American writer": ten years passed before William Lyon Phelps had the nerve or good fortune to make a similar claim for Twain.¹² Mencken praised Conrad and Dreiser when praise for them was not the fashion, and his evaluation of other contemporary writers was usually accurate. Mencken missed badly on a few of the new writers who are now considered major figures, but these failures were not due to an erratic judgment but to a more genteel and


conservative sensibility than is usually ascribed to him. While his criticism may be described as impressionistic—a term to which he did not strenuously object—it was based on a well developed philosophy of man and the universe. The tone of casualness which characterized his reviews usually obscured the criteria by which he judged literature. Consequently, the consistency with which he applied his criteria has generally been overlooked. However, when one becomes aware of these standards—the specification of which he usually reserved for discussion of his favored authors—then his consistency becomes more readily apparent.

This thesis will be developed in more detail in the succeeding chapters. For a fuller understanding of Mencken as a critic, the situation of American letters at the beginning of his critical activities will be presented along with some particulars of his background and career. However, in keeping with the main intent of this thesis, the major emphasis will be placed on three areas of his criticism, fiction, drama, and poetry, with a chapter covering each activity.
CHAPTER II

THE CRITICAL CLIMATE

The year 1910 began the first full decade of widespread revolt that overthrew what has been called the genteel tradition of American literature.¹ During the first ten years of the new century most of the new generation of critics had begun making their appearance, all dissatisfied with various aspects of the climate of domestic letters and searching for ways to improve it. Although our most influential literary figure, William Dean Howells, had aided such early American naturalists as Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Hamlin Garland before the turn of the century and had himself written novels which helped pioneer realism in this country, his conception of the term was either too fastidious or too lenient for the newcomers. Nevertheless, when Mencken began his uninhibited comment on the state of domestic literature from the Smart Set in 1908, Howells' image of the bounds of taste was almost universally accepted by the literary establishment. The proper subject of the novelist was generally agreed to be that of an Anglo-Saxon, protestant people, living a rural or small-town life of grace and homely virtues,

¹Cowley, After the Genteel Tradition, p. 5.
similar in its essentials to what their forefathers were supposed to have led. With the rapid urbanization that accompanied America's increase in population creating a new sophistication, it was inevitable that literature would have to change to reflect the changing face of the country.

The battle lines were not clearly drawn; it was not necessarily a clear-cut dispute between critics and the authors, with the reader a bystander. The struggle had been precipitated by Crane, Norris, and Dreiser, whose novels were a distinct embarrassment to the established dilettantes, academicians, and publishers who were generally satisfied to follow Howells' cautious lead. At about the same time William Cary Brownell ushered in the first substantial group of professional critics in America—the humanists—who, while approving of the accent on the moral tone of literature, wanted to upgrade literary standards by the tenets of critics such as Matthew Arnold and Sainte-Beuve. The humanistic critics saw the growth of naturalism in America as evidence of a pressing need for the development of a responsible group of native critics to counter such trends.

Two critics of those days, however, one a professor and the other primarily a newspaper writer, scorned the lack of

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spontaneity of the humanistic approach. Lewis Gates and James Huneker believed that the writer should not only not distrust his own artistic perception but should present it in a way that would communicate the immediacy of that perception.\(^\text{4}\) They felt that this same perception of what an artist intended to portray—impressionism in other words—would bring "... critics back to an intimate sense of art."\(^\text{5}\) However, by their reliance on feeling rather than specific rules of judgment, impressionists were too much the individualists to ally themselves in cliques or schools. Where Huneker was a practicing critic, Gates was more the evangelist. Huneker provided a refreshing voice in newspapers by describing the personalities and art of the European modernists to the American reader with a gusto that contrasted sharply with the moralistic bent and didacticism of the more typical American critics. Gates, on the other hand, was more concerned with reconciling impressionism with academic criticism.\(^\text{6}\)

Despite his didactic approach Brownell was not a professor, but he could claim the distinction of having been one of the founders of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and a long-time consultant with Scribner's. Like Huneker he turned instinctively to Europe for examples of

\(^\text{4}\) Ibid., p. 1078.  
\(^\text{5}\) Ibid., p. 1367.  
\(^\text{6}\) Ibid., p. 1078.
good literature; but where Huneker accepted writers without regard to their morals or background, Brownell deliberately looked for cultured, disciplined writers he could cite for Americans to follow. His *French Traits* (1889) and *French Art* (1892) began this search, and were followed by *Victorian Prose Masters* (1901) and *American Prose Masters* (1909). His principal archetype, arrived at by a process of elimination, was Matthew Arnold. Brownell accepted Arnold's belief that the regulation of an author's work as well as his personal behavior should evolve from the conscious exercise of reason. Two of his later books, *Criticism* (1914) and *Standards* (1917), contend that well-trained and applied reason is the only basis for judging any art, not an instinctive appreciation nor the blind use of arbitrary rules. Reflecting his predilection for critical theory, he said that "the cause of letters, the cause of art, is not that of its practitioners—hardly that of its practice—but of its constituting standards." Standards, whether individual or evolved, were of course close to the heart of the literary house-cleaning Brownell wished to initiate, but he failed to make clear what constituted them.

James Huneker did not fit easily into any of the American groups of critics. Although he was an impressionist by temperament and practice, he seemed content merely to point

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out in entertaining prose the European literature, music, and art that he considered beautiful or stimulating rather than engage actively in the critical controversy over American culture. Huneker stuck almost exclusively to European artists simply because he saw little in American culture that he considered worth commenting on aside from bemoaning its insularity. Mencken's admiration of Huneker's graceful iconoclasm was somewhat akin to his attraction to George Jean Nathan. Both Nathan and Huneker were aesthetes and hedonists, catholic in their cultural interests, but politically naive; their appeal to the young intellectuals was in part due to their hospitality to new literature and art which was either ignored or damned by the humanists. True to his impressionism, Huneker attempted no formulation of rules on criticism, but pioneered criticism intended more for entertainment than instruction. Mencken credited him with having routed the genteel critics of the nineties.

Lewis E. Gates was a Harvard professor on the other side of the ideological fence from his colleague, Irving Babbitt; his philosophy was reflected in his students Joel Spingarn and Frank Norris (the latter dedicated McTeague to him), as well as in his own work. In his essay "Impressionism

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and Appreciation" (1899), Gates pioneered the attempt to reconcile impressionism with criticism in America, saying "his [the critic's] aim is primarily not to explain and not to judge or dogmatize, but to enjoy: to realize the manifold charm the work of art has gathered into itself from all sources, and to interpret this charm imaginatively to the men of his own day and generation." He preferred to call his criticism "appreciation" to try to preclude accusations of being an advocate of non-discriminatory criticism associated with impressionism.

Irving Babbitt took up the call voiced by Brownell and elaborated on it vigorously and persistently for some twenty-five years. Babbitt, a Harvard professor of French literature, held humanistic ideas similar to Brownell's but he was less inclined to believe that American literature contained signs of developing self-discipline or a respectable tradition. Beginning with Literature and the American College (1908) he traced literary trends through a series of six closely-related books, each seeking to illustrate particular fallacies of thought and concluded that man must return to a philosophy epitomized by the Greek philosophers and the humanists of the Renaissance. Man, to him, must exercise his God-given will to keep his naturalistic makeup under

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10 Smith, Forces in American Criticism, p. 277.
11 Glicksberg, American Literary Criticism, p. 111.
control while developing his uniquely human qualities which set him apart from both God and nature. Babbitt accused science of luring man into an exaggerated kinship with nature that subverted his individuality in God's scheme of things;\textsuperscript{12} man's individuality could be realized only by an awareness of his intellectual past and the need to assert the power of reason over emotion. Naturalism in literature, to him, merely viewed man as an integral part of nature and did not account for man's sense of ethics or superior intellect; hence it could not help but portray degeneracy. Criticism, in Babbitt's eyes, must educate and uplift literature to conform to man's legitimate aspirations or it would be derelict in its primary function. Babbitt quite naturally took issue with what he thought was Mencken's desire to simplify critical standards to a matter of liking or disliking a work of art, and did not hesitate to deride this point of view before his students or in print.\textsuperscript{13} Apparently he was either unaware of or skeptical of the sincerity of Mencken's statement: "it [art] has its social, its political, even its moral implications."\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12}Smith, Forces in American Criticism, p. 342.

\textsuperscript{13}Albert Van Nostrand, editor, Literary Criticism in America (New York, 1957), p. 255.

Another subscriber to Brownell's philosophy was Paul Elmer More. A Harvard classmate of Babbitt, he was influenced in his critical beliefs by Babbitt while at school; after graduation he became an editor of the New York Evening Post and The Nation in succession and finally established his residence at Princeton. A quiet, contemplative man, he preferred to expound his personal philosophy in his extensive series of Shelburne Essays, which he began in 1901 and continued up to 1933. He made a lifelong study of religion and man, describing their relationship and expounding his conception of man's moral responsibilities. To More, man must find his own proper position between religion and temporal concerns, reaching a balance that would preclude any identification with naturalism. More's humanism closely resembled that of Babbitt, with whom he retained a friendship and collaboration after leaving college. However, he combined his criticism with an even greater emphasis on the moralistic conception of the function of literature than did Babbitt. Ironically More shared an admiration for the great man with Mencken and, like Mencken, wrote a book on Nietzsche; but his conception of a truly great man required that he have an exemplary background and the necessary awareness of the importance of the moral element in his work.

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15Smith, Forces in American Criticism, p. 343.
Stuart P. Sherman was a critic who shifted his own ideological leanings more than once during his career, but when he espoused a particular philosophy he defended it vigorously. He was influenced by Professor Babbitt while a student at Harvard and read More's work as a consequence. Sherman's first book, *Matthew Arnold: How to Know Him* (1917), on Arnold's humanist characteristics, and his *On Contemporary Literature* (1917), which derided current naturalistic trends, were his principal humanist works. At the entry of America in the First World War, Mencken infuriated Sherman by his pro-German statements and his disavowal of any viable American culture, provoking both a vehement defense of native tradition and attacks on German-American authors including Dreiser. After the war Sherman became one of the professors who deserted the campus for a more public platform, leaving the University of Illinois to take over as editor of the New York *Herald Tribune* book section in 1924. Despite his earlier humanistic views, Sherman was eventually attracted to naturalistic authors such as Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis, and began calling for an amalgamation of the two opposing philosophies; his *Critical Woodcuts* (1926) reflected this change. This drastic modification of his previous stand was not enough to persuade Mencken to forgive his earlier

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animosity, nor did it sit well with Babbitt and More. Sherman's untimely death in 1926 makes it difficult to assess the true direction or full extent of his conversion.

Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, and Mencken, who made their appearance near the end of the first decade of the new century, became the leaders of the critics dedicated to the proposition that naturalism should be accorded respectability. One description depicts these new champions thus:

They were drawn together in common protest against their elders rather than by a common aesthetic philosophy. To these young men the differences between the idealists and the humanists were not so significant as the similarities in their traditionalism and in their refusal to accept the inductive methods of thinking developed by modern science. The literary radicals demanded a complete and open-minded restudy of the whole relationship between literature and American life, past and present. In the excitement of the attack they did not take time to formulate their underlying principles or to assure the accuracy of their statements. They merely threw in their lot with the swelling current of naturalism in fiction, poetry, and drama; and they denounced all of the accepted American tradition as false because they found parts of it stultifying.18

The American tradition, as they saw it, was the lingering modification of the Puritan ethic kept alive long after it should have disappeared, and the literature that followed its guidelines was as unrealistic and didactic as its underlying philosophy. On the whole, however, these newcomers were not as apt to see the recent past as having been as barren of good literature as were the humanists. Generally,

18Spiller, Literary History of the United States, p. 1135.
Bourne, Brooks, and Mencken were intent on assuring the freedom of American literature to reflect the course of American life while the humanists were concerned with influencing the quality of future literature.

Although Randolph Bourne was the acknowledged prophet of the literary radicals, his writings were not as extensive as his influence would indicate. Youth and Life (1913), a collection of his essays, proclaimed his intention to be a radical and stated that he would use irony as the means to emphasize his contentions. Later he wrote essays for the Seven Arts magazine which were collected into Untimely Papers (1919), and Van Wyck Brooks compiled more of his papers posthumously in The History of a Literary Radical (1920). As a student, Bourne had criticized his elders for holding values whose primary purpose was to perpetuate the social hierarchy. 19 Twain, Thoreau, and Whitman were his American ideals—to him they were men who had the moral independence to struggle against the current mistaken depiction of life. However, Bourne did not offer any concrete alternatives to the system of values he would overthrow, and thereby left himself open to the charge of advocating literary anarchy. 20

Van Wyck Brooks, who had known Bourne and had collaborated with him until his early death, carried on as a major

19 Smith, Forces in American Criticism, p. 367.
20 Ibid., p. 367.
spokesman of the movement. Brooks's *Wine of the Puritans* (1908) explored the anti-intellectualism of the Puritan morality which silenced any divergence from its conception of right and wrong.\(^1\) He conceded that while the Puritan dogma was useful in its time for freeing the mind for immediate practical matters, it had become repressive under more civilized conditions. In *America's Coming of Age* (1915) he describes the evolution of the Puritan censorship into what he called "Highbrow" and "Lowbrow" judgment of literature.\(^2\) To Brooks any writing not meeting the arbitrary standards of the genteel establishment had not been considered worthy of intelligent, discriminating readers, or meriting any critical treatment but condemnation. He interpreted the struggle of the authors against this all-pervading censorship in psychological terms, charging that they had to make painful concessions of some sort or other in order to gain and hold a public. In his book *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* (1920) Brooks depicted Twain as a victim of these moral and philosophical restrictions who was forced to lapse into a caricature of the Mississippi river frontiersman rather than voice his deep skepticism.\(^3\) He characterized Howells' influence over Twain as an example of an insidious censorship.

\(^{1}\) Van Nostrand, *Literary Criticism in America*, p. xvi.


posing as helpful advice. Moving on to an example of physical escape to find freedom of expression, Brooks cited Henry James' flight to Europe in his next book The Pilgrimage of Henry James (1925). Finally, in Emerson and Others (1927) he suggested that Emerson had found an alternative to flight or retreat in the form of a personally imposed idealism. Ironically, Brooks, who was one of the earliest proponents of naturalism, eventually subscribed to a modified idealist's creed. But his Ordeal of Mark Twain and Pilgrimage of Henry James had struck powerful blows for literary freedom before he began to reinterpret his philosophy. 24 Neither Bourne nor Brooks had specifically denied the need for morality; what they had objected to was the repressive effect that the imposition of an arbitrary morality and an invalid tradition had on society and letters. They concluded that any attempt to impose rules in place of the Puritan ethic would be equally repressive. What remained then was the tracing of a more realistic past and the establishment of the freedom under which literature could reflect the changing present.

Bourne and Brooks gathered an enthusiastic following that was convinced, as they were, of the obsolescence of the old criteria of literary guidance. The movement's recognition of the growing gulf separating criticism and literature initially went no further than demands for freedom. In

24 Cowley, After the Genteel Tradition, p. 66.
accordance with his philosophy, Bourne had not recognized any need for an alliance with the aims of the new authors. On the other hand, Brooks eventually maintained that he had never actually questioned the need for a workable ideality, but the rebellion had run its course by the time he made this statement.25

If tradition were to be repudiated as a practical basis for the establishment of literary standards and if there were to be any guidance in its place, other men than Bourne, Brooks, or their followers would have to formulate it. What the new radicals were concerned with was the discreditation of the restrictive rules and their proponents, not the assumption of guidance themselves. Other radicals, like Matthew Josephson and Ludwig Lewisohn, agreed with the psychological explanation of the estrangement that Brooks expounded, but they carried the search off into the realm of Freudian thought. Still others, like Max Eastman, Waldo Frank, and John Reed became influenced by Marxism and saw the problem primarily as an outgrowth of social evolution.26

Joel Spingarn was one of those critics opposed to the imposition of guidelines so dear to the heart of the humanists. He was a Harvard man who, after teaching some twelve years at Columbia and serving in the First World War, held the

25 Glicksberg, American Literary Criticism, p. 27.
influential position of literary editor of Harcourt, Brace and Company from its founding until 1932. As an ardent advocate of the critical thought of Benedetto Croce, Spingarn proclaimed that "we have done with all the old rules . . ." and claimed that "the very conception of rules harks back to an age of magic," statements not calculated to please the humanists. Mencken gave a wary welcome to Spingarn's philosophy, but could not agree with his contention that art could be created without consideration of life in all its ramifications. In Spingarn's eyes the raging literary battle ignored the necessity for the understanding of expressionism, while a tendency of the humanists to equate his critical philosophy with impressionism further complicated his attempts to promulgate it. He maintained that Americans were not prepared by background or inclination to exercise what was the only legitimate function of criticism, the determination of the aesthetic validity of a creative work, and took as the cornerstone of his philosophy Carlyle's statement, "The critic's first and foremost duty is to make plain to himself 'what the poet's aim really and truly was, how the task he had to do stood before his eye, and how far, with such materials as were afforded him, he has fulfilled

27 Smith, Forces in American Criticism, p. 279.
29 Smith, Forces in American Criticism, p. 281.
Slingarn's work included *The New Criticism* (1911), *Creative Criticism* (1917), and *A Slingarn Enchiridion* (1929) which rebutted More's contention that he merely taught impressionism. In addition, his compilation of critical highlights in *Criticism in America: Its Function and Status* (1924) summarized the controversy from the statements of the leading critics on both sides of the conflict.

Inasmuch as Mencken is the center of this study, it seems logical to treat his part in the battle over realism in greater detail than that given to his contemporaries. Also, it seems expedient to examine at this point his literary background and other factors which influenced the nature of his criticism.

Mencken came to literary criticism by a different route than that followed by most of his fellow critics. From the beginning of his professional life until its close, he was a practicing newspaper man. He began as a kid reporter for the *Baltimore Morning Herald* at eighteen and at twenty-five had become its editor. Later he became associated with the *Sun* papers; and during his years as editor of the *Smart Set* and the *American Mercury*, he retained this relationship, occasionally returning to reporting to cover special assignments such as the Scopes "monkey" trial. After his retirement from the *Mercury*, he continued in an advisory capacity.

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30 Glicksberg, *American Literary Criticism*, p. 82.
with the Sun papers and, until his incapacitating stroke in 1948, did frequent political writing and covered the national conventions of the major political parties.

Also unlike most of his fellow critics, he was not university trained. His formal education ceased at fifteen with his graduation from the Polytechnic High School, where he stood at the head of his class. Despite his failure to continue in school, at eighteen he had read vastly more than most college graduates. His infatuation with books had begun early. By his own account, he was "a steady and heavy reader" by the time he was eight. "Before he was twelve he had plowed at home and abroad through a mass of miscellaneous reading matter, including the novels of Dickens, Chamber's Encyclopedia, Ben Hur, and Edward Bellamy's Looking Backward."31 Certainly the most exciting discovery of those years was Huckleberry Finn. In Happy Days he speaks of its impact on him. "I had entered a domain of new and gorgeous wonders," he said. According to Bode,

By the time Mencken reached his teens he was reading systematically and meaningfully. He discovered Thackeray and feasted on his Victorian abundance, finding him nearly as rich as Dickens. From the Victorians he worked back to the great British writers of the eighteenth century, Addison, Steele, Pope, and Samuel Johnson among them. He went back further still to the Renaissance and Shakespeare, and thereafter to Chaucer, whose racier tales delighted him. By the time he was fifteen he had read the whole canon of English classics and had

seasoned them with selections from minor works. Though few authors, major or minor, daunted him he found it impossible to read Milton's *Paradise Lost* as well as most of the works by Edmund Spenser.32

Kipling was his favorite among the modern English writers. William Dean Howells, Frank Stockton, Henry James, Stephen Crane, and Richard Harding Davis were among the Americans whom he enjoyed. For his biographer Goldberg, Mencken summed up his reading somewhat expansively, "Altogether, I doubt that any human being in this world has ever read more than I did between my twelfth and eighteenth years."33 Among the discoveries of his teens were James Huneker and Thomas Henry Huxley. Huneker's criticism was to prove a continuing source of delight to Mencken, and Huxley not only provided him with a prose model but was a major formative influence upon his thought. The reading of Huxley led him to Herbert Spencer and to such of their contemporaries as Henry Thomas Buckle and James Anthony Froude.34 In his late teens or early twenties he became acquainted with the writings of Ibsen, Shaw, and Nietzsche.

If reading and writing are not only the basis of an education but its major constituents, Mencken got something better than a university education. In addition to the variety of experience that he had with the *Herald*—reporting,
editing, criticizing plays, writing his own columns—he wrote and published poems and short stories in a variety of magazines. The short stories that he wrote for Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly brought him an offer from Ellery Sedgwick, its editor, to join the staff of that magazine.

Huxley, Shaw, and Nietzsche were major influences in shaping the young Mencken, or perhaps one should say that their ideas and attitudes were particularly congenial to him. Huxley, in particular, was an inspiration. As Mencken said of him, years after the initial acquaintance with his writing,

All his life long he flung himself upon authority—when it was stupid, ignorant and tyrannical. He attacked it with every weapon in his rich arsenal—wit, scorn, and above all superior knowledge. To it he opposed a single thing: the truth as it could be discovered and established—the plain truth that sets men free.

"When that rich arsenal was directed at religion, it had a powerful effect on Mencken," says Bode. "He [Mencken] said explicitly, 'Huxley gave order and coherence to my own doubts and converted me into a violent agnostic.'" 35

At twenty-five he published his first book—George Bernard Shaw: His Plays, which incidentally was the first book to be published on Shaw. His exposition of Nietzsche, which came out three years later, was the first American treatment of that philosopher. Although Mencken later became

35 Ibid., p. 79.
strongly critical of Shaw, he admitted that he and Shaw "worked the same side of the street." Obviously they shared a common iconoclasm and the ability to attract readers through breaches of decorum. Mencken's study of Nietzsche confirmed his admiration for the superior man and his conviction that ethics were far from immutable.

Mencken's study of Nietzsche was a continuing one. In addition to his Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (1908), he translated and edited The Antichrist (1920) and wrote other expositions of his philosophy. His initial study of Shaw led him to wide reading in the contemporary dramatists and to editing two of Ibsen's plays, Little Eyolf and A Doll's House.

By the time Mencken had begun his career in the Smart Set, his prose style was crystallized and his philosophy formed. His subject was at hand--the American scene, our national life. His procedure was a slashing attack on almost every group and region of the United States. As Morison says,

He lashed out at almost every group in American society—the "booboisie," the "anthropoids" of the Alleghenies; the Gelehrten ("as pathetic an ass as a university professor of history"), the politicians ("crooks and charlatans"), evangelists ("gaudy zanies"), orators ("the seemly bosh of the late Woodrow"), parsons and priests ("mountebanks"), and guardians of public morals ("wowsers").

36 Nolte, Mencken: Literary Critic, p. 29.
Morison continues: "Mencken was no social reformer but a saucy iconoclast who had something amusing to say about every region, class, and profession in America. He despised democracy and freely predicted that it would dissolve into despotism; he discerned very little good in American life." Yet the verve of his attack, his joyous exaggerations, and the splendor of his invective brought pleasure to many who did not share his opinions.

His dominant theme was the puritanism of American life. He found it in almost every aspect of our past and present. It had deprived our people of any esprit, of any sense of the joy of life, said Mencken. It had inhibited our writers. Its worst manifestation was the "Blue Nose," the professional reformer. In his essay "Puritanism as a Literary Force," he not only cited the effects of puritanism on our literature and national life but detailed the activities of the Watch and Ward societies, the Comstocks, and the Sumners. Many American authors and publishers knew from bitter experience that the force he described was real and dangerous. Quasi official censorship existed in Boston, New York, and other parts of the country. As a rule the reformers had the government attorneys and the courts on their side and could count on the cooperation of some publishers. In his busy life, Anthony Comstock, founder of the Society for the

Suppression of Vice, had hailed several thousand individuals into court and "caused the destruction of tons of books, some of which were simply pornography but others of which represented serious literature."  

Mencken's friend and protégé, Dreiser, became the favorite target of Comstock's successor, Sumner. Dreiser's first novel, *Sister Carrie* (1900), had been brought forth reluctantly by its publisher who had anticipated correctly the reaction of the public. American readers did not approve of a novel in which the heroine lived in common-law marriage with two men and yet at the end of the novel was shown as having reached the pinnacle of fame as an actress. These readers were accustomed to seeing vice punished in the novel and here it appeared to be rewarded. By 1916 Dreiser's truculence, the progress of his fiction in the years that had intervened since *Sister Carrie*, and even the fact that he had a German name had done nothing to incline the public in his favor. There was no public outcry against the governmental action, taken at Sumner's instigation, of banning Dreiser's *The Genius* from the mails as immoral. However, Mencken's deepest feelings were aroused. He had been among the first to recognize the merits of *Sister Carrie*, and a friendship had developed between the two men with Mencken in the role of mentor and critic. Mencken had

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steadily pressed Dreiser's claim to greatness and had proclaimed his second novel, *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911), as the best American novel since *Huckleberry Finn*. Although Mencken's German antecedents and sympathies had rendered him also suspect, he was successful in enlisting the support of the Author's League and in seeing the ban lifted.

Mencken's severest bout with the New Humanists was also due in part to his championing of Dreiser. Mencken continued to battle censorship. His part in the Scopes trial (1925) was more than that of a reporter; it was Mencken who interested Clarence Darrow in taking up the defense of Scopes. In 1927, in the celebrated "Hat Rack" case Mencken invited arrest in a further test of the censorship laws.

The importance of Mencken's role in the artist's battle for freedom of expression has been commonly conceded, but the usual consensus has been to deny him significance as a critic. However, the fact remains that for roughly a quarter of a century he commented upon most of the important works of fiction and poetry published in this country. Nolte has estimated that he reviewed more than two thousand books for the *Smart Set*.\(^{39}\) When one adds his reviews and articles in the *Mercury*, his book of *Prefaces*, and the criticism contained in the six volumes of his *Prejudices*, the volume of his literary criticism is considerable. Moreover, he was

\(^{39}\) Nolte, *Mencken's Smart Set Criticism*, p. xi.
probably the most influential critic in this country, if one may rely upon such opinions as those of the *New York Times* and Walter Lippmann which were cited in the first chapter of this study.

That his criticism was both extensive and influential does not, of course, mean that it was of the first quality. Indeed, one must recognize notable limitations in his taste and procedures. His hard-ridden thesis that puritanism had enervated American life and literature led him to belittle American writing before Mark Twain. A summary of American literature that dismisses Hawthorne with a phrase—"the harsh Puritanical fables of Hawthorne"—may serve the purposes of polemic, but it distorts literary history. It should be recognized also that Mencken's taste was limited primarily to writing in the realistic-naturalistic tradition and that his highest praise was reserved for those writers whose philosophy was naturalistic, as was his own. His taste in poetry was limited, and he was ill-prepared to cope with the innovations in poetry that came with Eliot and those which Joyce introduced in prose fiction. Yet the burden of this thesis is that when his work as a whole is considered he must be pronounced more than a competent critic. Judging a vast volume of writing as it appeared from the press, he showed an unusual ability to recognize excellence. He succeeded in that most difficult task of the critic, the judgment of his contemporaries.
It seems that Mencken tired of criticism before he gave up the Mercury, but the volume of his other writings continued unabated. He had pursued other literary projects in conjunction with his work on the Smart Set and the Mercury. These writings included not only The Book of Prefaces (1917) and the series of Prejudices (1919-1927) but also In Defense of Women (1918), Heliogabalus (1920), Notes on Democracy (1926), and Treatise on the Gods (1930). His acclaimed American Language was first published in 1919 and appeared in new and revised editions in 1921, 1923, 1936, 1945, and 1948. Publications after he left the Mercury included Treatise on Right and Wrong (1934), Dictionary of Quotations on Historical Principles (1942), A Christmas Story (1946), A Mencken Chrestomathy (1949), and Minority Report (1956). Perhaps the most enjoyable of these is the autobiographical series Happy Days (1940), Newspaper Days (1941), and Heathen Days (1943), which appeared originally as articles in the New Yorker. His career was brought to an end by a stroke in 1948, but he was to live for eight more years. To him, such an ending to his career was a grim joke of fate and evidence of the truth of his view of the forces which rule our lives.
CHAPTER III

MENCKEN'S CRITICISM OF FICTION

Although Mencken's most valuable service to literature was his contribution toward the establishment of a milieu in which authors could work without harassment, he was a better critic than has generally been conceded. That is to say, most of the authors who were his favorites are still recognized as having been among the best of his day. Mencken was an early advocate of Conrad and Dreiser when the former was not yet well known in America and the latter was considered too raw to be read. Further, he saw the promise of Willa Cather and Sherwood Anderson and was the mentor of Sinclair Lewis during Lewis' most productive years. Mencken accepted Bennett's writing with cogent reservations and astutely traced Wells's decline as a writer of fiction after a favorable beginning. Finally, he had foreseen Mark Twain's preeminent place in American literature long before the academicians recognized Twain as anything more than a comedian.

Mencken's misjudgments, on the other hand, can at least be accounted for by his personal taste. When questioning his high opinion of Cabell, one should recall that Cabell's critical reputation was at its apex when Mencken praised him, and, even now, certain critics and readers believe that
Cabell's work is unjustly slighted. Also, Mencken, with his sensitivity in regard to writing skill, could understandably have been appreciative of Cabell's lucid style. As for Mencken's distaste for Joyce and Lawrence, it was in keeping with his conservative bent, however erroneous his judgment on these two writers may seem in retrospect.

The conservative factor in Mencken's criticism was curiously mixed with a strong advocacy of realism, the basic tenet of his criticism. In accordance with this philosophy, Mencken believed that credible characterization was indispensable to good fiction so the reader could feel a kindred sense of involvement. He further believed that the story could be credible while being simple and that it should support characterization by furnishing clear reasons for the actions of the characters. And, if realism was to be served, the story could not omit situations that heretofore had been considered too sordid to appear in American fiction.

Mencken maintained that the novel should convey the sense of the impersonality of life and its capricious workings on the fate of man. However, this impression should be implied by the situation of the story, not by any direct advocacy. He also saw any moralizing in the novel as entirely alien to his conviction that fiction is an art rather than an attempt to teach anything. He believed that

1Edmund Wilson, "The James Branch Cabell Case Reopened," New Yorker, XXXII (April 21, 1956), 140.
the art of fiction, in other words, simply involved the attempt to portray life realistically and was not the subservient means of getting any lesson across to the reader. However, Mencken's conservatism rebelled against the use of explicitness as an end in itself, so he held that detail must be used with discretion—a story could be more easily overtold than understated and the bounds of taste were still to be considered.

The English classicists, Fielding, Thackeray, and Hardy, were the authors Mencken most often cited as examples of how the novel should be written, although his discussion of them was confined to isolated comments. Mencken saw the creation of the character of Tom Jones as the single accomplishment of Fielding that overshadowed all of his other qualities. His speaking of the impossibility of detaching Fielding "... from his buoyant optimism, his belief in mankind, his firm conviction that the mere being alive is sufficient for happiness"² was a disparaging comment, but it did not color Mencken's admiration for his characterization of Tom Jones.

In speaking of memorable characters in literature, Mencken said that "Rabelais created two, Fielding one, Thackeray three or four and Shakespeare a roomful . . . ."³

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²H. L. Mencken, "A Glance at the Spring Fiction" (April, 1910), cited in Nolte, Mencken: Literary Critic, p. 76.

³Mencken, "Popularity Index" (June, 1910), reprinted in Nolte, Mencken's Smart Set Criticism. It should be noted that Nolte gives only the date of the article and does not supply the volume number and inclusive pages in this book.
In addition to recognizing Thackeray's ability to draw vivid and accurate portraits of Englishmen, Mencken linked him with Shakespeare, Pushkin, Balzac, and Twain in their common lack of lofty detachment. However, Mencken saw Thackeray as detached from the fate of his characters, noting that "Rabelais and Thackeray were cynics and so they saw life as a great game of make-believe, with all of the participants wearing grotesque cloaks and masques . . . ." This philosophy approached Mencken's acid view of life and thus was probably Thackeray's chief attraction to him.

Possibly Thomas Hardy's philosophy of life was even closer to Mencken's beliefs than was Thackeray's. In any case, Hardy was frequently cited by Mencken as being a pessimistic realist of great power. Mencken saw Hardy's philosophy as being founded on a realization of the hopeless tragedy of life and was moved by his stark portrayal of man's futile struggle against an unknown adversary. Mencken referred to the Comstocks' suppression of Hardy's Jude the Obscure near the turn of the century, viewing their action as one more reason for the necessity of their overthrow.  

\[ \text{Mencken, "Final Estimate" (October, 1919), reprinted in Nolte, Mencken's Smart Set Criticism, p. 185.} \]

\[ \text{Mencken, "A Hot Weather Novelist" (August, 1910), cited in Nolte, Mencken: Literary Critic, p. 47.} \]

\[ \text{H. L. Mencken, A Book of Prefaces (New York, 1917), p. 260.} \]
And, in a swipe at the humanists, Mencken asserted that Paul Elmer More acted as if he had never heard of Hardy.  

Such realists as Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Dickens obviously did not conform to Mencken's particular criteria of realism. Mencken, for instance, seldom mentioned Jane Austen in his critical pieces; but, when he did, his comment was similar to his linking of her with Washington Irving and Hannah More, all three being accused of "making pretty waxen groups" and of being "toilsome, fastidious and self-conscious craftsmen." Nolte believes that Austen's honesty should have qualified her as a realist in Mencken's eyes, but Mencken evidently saw no need to point out that honesty. Mencken was silent on George Eliot, but it can be assumed that he did not deem her moralizing worthy of comment. On the other hand, Mencken cited Dickens as a prime example of the Victorian optimist and moralist. Typical was his assertion that Dickens had a "... sentimental view of the world, with its cardinal doctrine that all human ills are to be cured by love." Mencken had no patience with such a philosophy. However, what he saw in America and England in his own time gave evidence of a continuance of the healthy

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7Nolte, Mencken: Literary Critic, p. 174.
8Mencken, Prejudices: First Series, p. 58.
9Nolte, Mencken: Literary Critic, p. 83.
10Mencken, "A Glance at the Spring Fiction" (April, 1910), cited in Nolte, Mencken: Literary Critic, p. 76.
literary tradition established by Fielding, Thackeray, and Hardy.

Mencken saw few qualities in the writing of the classical American writers, Hawthorne, Poe, Howells, and James to recommend or try to perpetuate. Twain, not yet seriously considered in their company, was the only nineteenth-century American author whose fiction he respected. The names of Hawthorne, Poe, and James were usually brought up by Mencken to emphasize their particular reactions to American Philistinism in their time, so he commented only incidentally on their literary characteristics. Very briefly, Mencken saw Poe as a writer of ordinary short stories (he admired him chiefly for his audacious literary criticism), Hawthorne as a sort of hermit concerned with psychological problems, and James as "a sort of super-Howells, albeit a superb technician." Howells, to Mencken, was the last surviving purveyor of the genteel tradition and therefore was an ideological enemy. Although Mencken acknowledged Howells' early but qualified encouragement of such men as Crane and Norris, he considered him too shackled by his innate squeamishness; and Mencken, like Brooks, waxed scornful of his influence on Twain.

11 Mencken, "Our Literary Centers" (November, 1920), reprinted in Nolte, Mencken's Smart Set Criticism, pp. 13-14.
As a young newspaper man of twenty, Mencken had praised *Huckleberry Finn* as being the finest American novel. Ten years later, William Lyon Phelps ventured to give the book what was, in Mencken's words, "the first honest and hearty praise . . . by a college professor in good standing, that these eyes had ever encountered. . . ." While commenting cynically on the time it took for this evaluation to be made in America, Mencken pointed out the fact that the English had publicly recognized Twain's genius in the early nineties and that other Americans were belatedly beginning to follow their lead by the time of Twain's death in 1910. Repeatedly, Mencken proclaimed his belief that *Huckleberry Finn* was one of the great literary masterpieces of the world. And he assigned Twain a singular historical position, asserting that he was the first native artist to project the American point of view. While Mencken noted that Twain had grave deficiencies in his aesthetic background, he asserted that Twain's close association with provincial American life was unique among native authors and the basis for the authenticity of his art. In articles on Twain and in numerous references to him, Mencken noted his clear style of writing, his


13 Mencken, "Popularity Index" (June, 1910), reprinted in Nolte, *Mencken's Smart Set Criticism*, pp. 176-177.

14 Mencken, "Final Estimate" (October, 1919), reprinted in Nolte, *Mencken's Smart Set Criticism*, p. 186.
talent at characterization, his cynical view of life, and his compassionate view of man, as well as the fact that Twain had been misjudged by his contemporaries.

Whenever he considered Twain's prose, Mencken revealed his admiration for his untaught style with its power and simplicity. In a short piece entitled "Twain and Howells," Mencken compared the greatly contrasting styles of the two men, stating that "the one wrote English as Michelangelo hacked marble, broadly, brutally, magnificently; the other was a maker of pretty waxen groups." Later, again to emphasize Twain's preeminence in prose, Mencken credited Twain with having written "... cleaner, straighter, vivider, saner English, than either Irving or Hawthorne."

The skepticism of Twain during a time when such views were still frowned upon in America was something that could not fail to excite Mencken's interest. However, he did not admire Twain's intellectual timorousness in not proclaiming his beliefs more openly. Still he marveled at Twain's sharp eye "... for the bogus, in religion, politics, art, literature, patriotism, virtue!" and said that the more Twain looked at life the more it seemed to be meaningless.

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15 Mencken, "Twain and Howells" (January, 1911), reprinted in Nolte, Mencken's Smart Set Criticism, p. 178.

16 Mencken, "Our One Authentic Giant" (February, 1913), reprinted in Nolte, Mencken's Smart Set Criticism, p. 179.

17 Mencken, "Final Estimate" (October, 1919), reprinted in Nolte, Mencken's Smart Set Criticism, p. 186.
As for Twain's sympathetic view of mankind, Mencken said that he had seen man as "... humbugs, but as humbugs to be dealt with gently...". And, stressing the uniqueness of his portrayal of Huckleberry Finn, Mencken asserted that nothing comparable to him could be found in Hawthorne, Poe, Cooper, or Holmes.

When Mencken discussed contemporary British authors, he focused his attention on the writers whose talents he appreciated. Consequently, Conrad, Bennett, Wells, and Moore got precedence over Joyce and Lawrence in his criticism. It is difficult to read either chauvinism or Anglomania into any of Mencken's work; he simply wrote what he thought, not hesitating to change his opinions when he saw changes in the work of any author. Whereas he gave a strictly qualified approval to Bennett's works, noting their relative uniformity of quality as they came out, he praised Wells' early novels highly, then as he thought Wells had changed, began to criticize him unmercifully. His comments on George Moore, while briefer than those on Wells and Bennett, were uniformly approving. Conrad stood in a class by himself in Mencken's eyes and he treated him accordingly.

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18 Mencken, "Our One Authentic Giant" (February, 1913), reprinted in Nolte, Mencken's Smart Set Criticism, p. 180.

19 Mencken, "Popularity Index" (June, 1910), reprinted in Nolte, Mencken's Smart Set Criticism, p. 178.
In 1912 Mencken stated that Joseph Conrad was the greatest artist writing in English at that time. During Mencken's critical career, he bestowed more unreserved praise on Conrad than on any other author and, with the possible exception of Dreiser, wrote more expository articles on Conrad and made more widespread comment on him than on any other literary personage. In the Smart Set Mencken reviewed all of Conrad's books appearing after 1908. Whenever he mentioned such tales as Youth, Heart of Darkness, and Lord Jim, he usually asserted their right to be called classics. The fatalistic theme that pervaded all of Conrad's novels is what attracted Mencken most, judging from his comments, but he also praised Conrad's realistic characterization, his unique use of English, his irony, and his skill at developing basically simple plots. It is difficult to find anything in Mencken's criticism of Conrad that is in any way disapproving.

The closest Mencken came to voicing disapproval was a comment on Conrad's English. In a piece he wrote on Conrad in 1912, Mencken stated that Conrad's prose reflected his labored search for the appropriate phrase and went on to say that his occasional clumsiness and deliberateness should be

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20Mencken, "Conrad's Self-Portrait" (January, 1912), reprinted in Nolte, Mencken's Smart Set Criticism, p. 231.
accepted as a concession to his greatness.21 Some three years after publication of his *The American Language*, Mencken changed his tune, saying that "the truly first-rate writer is not one who uses the language as such dolts [schoolmasters and their dupes] demand that it be used; he is one who reworks it in spite of their prohibition."22 Still a couple of years later Mencken said of Conrad, "his style is not only not obscure: it is extraordinarily vigorous and clear."23

Mencken was attracted by the level of skepticism he saw in Conrad, "... not complacent and attitudinizing, like Anatole France's, nor bitter and despairing, like Thomas Hardy's or Mark Twain's, but rather the serene skepticism of the scientist..."24 He also noted that "Joseph Conrad is quite as unshakable an agnostic as Bennett; he is a ten times more implacable ironist."25 This skepticism seemed to liberate him from what Mencken called the traditional point of view of the novelist.26

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22 Mencken, "Conrad Revisited" (December, 1922), reprinted in Nolte, *Mencken's Smart Set Criticism*, p. 242.


24 Ibid.


Mencken approvingly quoted Conrad as having said, "My task is, by the power of the printed word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, above all, to make you see." Seizing upon Walpole's allegation that Conrad was an intricate combination of realist and romanticist, Mencken agreed, adding that the combination of both outlooks enabled a writer to be truer to life's varied aspects. But later, apparently contradicting himself, Mencken maintained that Conrad "was a realist of the realists, for all his fondness for violent passions and outlandish scenes."

The grandeur of Conrad's novels awed Mencken. He was fully conscious of the fact that Conrad dealt with universal tragedy in an epic manner. Mencken described Conrad's art in superlatives.

What he sees and describes in his books is not merely this man's aspiration or that woman's destiny, but the overwhelming sweep and devastation of universal forces, the great central drama that is at the heart of all other dramas, the tragic struggles of the soul of man under the gross stupidity and obscene joking of the gods.

The depth of Conrad's tragedy in Mencken's estimation was not the futility of his protagonists' struggles, but the very fact of their challenging in the face of such odds.

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27 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Mencken, A Book of Prefaces, pp. 63-64.
31 Ibid.
Bennett had some qualities in his fiction similar to those of Conrad, and Mencken took due note of them in his essay, "Arnold Bennett." However, Mencken felt that Bennett's novels did not draw the reader into a sense of involvement with any of his characters; in other words his was a barren type of realism. Mencken cited his extreme skepticism, aloofness, and irony, qualities he admired. While allowing that Bennett did not commit the mistake of trying to moralize in his books, Mencken claimed that he never could project any feeling into his stories and was largely an impersonal if discerning portrayer of the typical Englishman, of large groups of people, and even whole societies. Mencken concluded that he was hardly a novelist in the true sense of the word, but merely a portrayer of a whole society, skillful but unconventional. 32

The vehemence with which Mencken criticized Wells's decline was signified by the title of the article in which he described Wells's career in fiction: the article was titled "The Late Mr. Wells." Describing Wells's qualities which he had often praised in the past, Mencken recalled that he had imagination, fluency, humor, and an observing eye; that he had had four good years before beginning to lose his touch. 33 His stories, according to Mencken, began to become

32 Mencken, Prejudices: First Series, pp. 36-51.
33 Ibid., p. 23.
unconvincing and more didactic, the excellence of his *Tono Bungay* giving way to *The Soul of a Bishop*, "perhaps the worst novel ever written by a serious novelist since novel-writing began."  

Mencken summed up Wells's deterioration by attributing it to the onset of a "messianic delusion of . . . one of the Great Thinkers of his era . . ." and concluded that "his old rival was Arnold Bennett. His new rival is the Fabian Society. . . ."  

George Moore fared much better in Mencken's estimation; he mentioned his name with such authors as Hardy, Conrad, and Zola and obviously considered him to be a peer of that august company. Moore's talents were usually mentioned casually in connection with some literary merit Mencken wished to point out, but if his remarks are all taken together, he credited Moore with solid virtues. With Hardy and Conrad, Moore was said to have portrayed the true meaninglessness and tragedy of life with insight and to have viewed life as a conflict of flesh and spirit.  

In contrast to his treatment of Bennett, Wells, and Moore, Mencken never liked Lawrence's writing. Although the *Smart Set* printed some of Lawrence's short stories, Mencken

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could see no redeeming features to mention in his few comments on him. Nolte contends that Mencken believed Lawrence's popularity was based primarily on his constant preoccupation with sex, and it is certainly easy to see why Mencken could come to that conclusion. However, there is evidence that points to Mencken's having based his disapproval as much on Lawrence's method as on his main theme.

Mencken seemed to be in character when he took Lawrence to task for violating the oft-stated canons of his criticism. In his review of *Aaron's Rod* he complained, "Now and then they [his characters] interest me vaguely, but I never find myself assuming that they are real. They look to me to be simply a set of marionettes for discharging the ideas of their creator--and the ideas of their creator . . . strike me as extremely dubious." Mencken accused Lawrence of poor characterization, moralizing, vagueness, and of propounding questionable ideas--weaknesses which Mencken did not excuse away by virtue of Lawrence's having other compensating qualities.

When another author inveighed against "... the erotic primitivism of D. H. Lawrence and the gigantic *fin de siècle* pedantries and experimentalisms of James Joyce . . ." Mencken

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agreed with him. However, Joyce seemed to have been an author about whom Mencken uncharacteristically had difficulty in making up his mind. Probably because of this inability to either accept or reject Joyce unequivocally, Mencken shied away from any extensive comment on the Irishman. The conservative element of Mencken's nature undoubtedly recoiled against Joyce's experimentalism and explicit treatment of sex, but nevertheless he seemed convinced of Joyce's artistic integrity.

In an essay entitled "On Realism" Mencken took issue with a review of *Ulysses*, which he said had praised it as "... a complete and exact record of a day in the life of its people." Mencken answered that the thought had come from Joyce, not the Blooms. While further commenting that Marion's concluding monologue was patently false, he emphasized that it was not false in Joyce's eyes. But, while allowing for the free exercise of Joyce's imagination, Mencken omitted any direct personal judgment on the success of Joyce's efforts. The closest Mencken came to saying that Joyce's concept of realism had failed was when he later

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complained that younger authors were being "... debauched by the experiments of such men as James Joyce..."\(^\text{42}\)

The one indispensable characteristic Mencken looked for in the British writers--realism--he also looked for among the Americans. Dreiser, Cather, Lewis, and Anderson were all primarily realists despite their other divergent qualities; and, as such, Mencken saw in them, more than in other native writers, evidence of the vitality of the new literary movement in America. Consequently, he gave them advice and encouragement as well as criticism and a chance to become better known. In following the careers of these authors, Mencken was more apt to note any appreciable improvement or deviation from their realistic stance than any change in their style.

Because of the realism and depth of Dreiser's novels and his steadfastness in the face of assaults by the Comstocks, Mencken saw in him the means of liberating and giving direction to other struggling American novelists. Mencken pictured Dreiser as a giant of American literature, saying such unabashed things of him as, "Out of the desert of American fictioneering, so populous and yet so dreary, Dreiser stands up--a phenomenon unescapably visible, but disconcertingly hard to explain."\(^\text{43}\)


endeavored to do, giving him more space than he gave to any other American author.

Mencken, although he tried, could not locate the precise sources which shaped Dreiser's career, calling him for want of clear influences "a great instinctive artist." He quickly discounted the possibility of Norris' influence, saying that Dreiser had read McTeague only after Sister Carrie was completed. Mencken, probably hearkening to his own experience, tried to equate Dreiser's reading of Spencer and Huxley with the formation of his philosophy. In fact, he said that Dreiser had told him of the part the two Englishmen had played in ridding him of his Catholicism and of quickening his curiosity about life, and Mencken added somewhat wistfully that he wished Dreiser had also copied Huxley's style.

Whenever Mencken wrote on Dreiser, he usually complained about what he considered his greatest weaknesses, his wordiness and lack of style. Dreiser's "exasperating rolling up of irrelevant fact," as Mencken termed it, was the principal reason for the extreme length of most of his novels, drawing more criticism than his triteness of phrasing or lack of consistent improvement in his novel-writing.  

\[^{44}\]Ibid., p. 94. \[^{45}\]Ibid., p. 70. \[^{46}\]Ibid., pp. 74-75. \[^{47}\]Ibid., p. 81.
credited some unknown editor, not Dreiser, with Sister Carrie's brevity, commenting that The Titan and Jennie Gerhardt had not been so mercifully trimmed.  

Despite the length of Jennie Gerhardt, Mencken termed it the best American novel since Huckleberry Finn. In his comment Mencken characteristically mixed his objections and praise.

As it stands, grim, gaunt, mirthless, shapeless, it remains, and by long odds, the most impressive work of art that we have yet to show in prose fiction—a tale not unrelated in its stark simplicity, its profound sincerity, to Germinal and Anna Karenina and Lord Jim—a tale assertingly American in its scene and human material, and yet so European in its method. . . .

Mencken added that Jennie Gerhardt was a "criticism and an interpretation of life—and that interpretation loses nothing in validity by the fact that its burden is the doctrine that life is meaningless, a tragedy without a moral, a joke without a point. What else have Moore and Conrad and Hardy been telling us all these years?"

In 1920 Mencken was still praising Jennie Gerhardt and pointing out its "profound, tragic, exquisite" feeling. Mencken had said earlier that the essence of Dreiser's work

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48 Ibid., p. 82.

49 Mencken, "A Modern Tragedy" (November, 1911), reprinted in Nolte, Mencken's Smart Set Criticism, p. 245.

50 Ibid.

51 Mencken, "De Profundis" (May, 1920), reprinted in Nolte, Mencken's Smart Set Criticism, p. 258.
was "a matter of pure feeling" and that his "Athenian tragedy" makes one forget the defects in his prose.52 The book obviously supported Mencken's belief that "the aim of a work of art is not to make one think painfully, but to make one feel beautifully."53 Mencken's reference to thinking was an oblique reference to moralizing, one quality definitely not found in Dreiser's novels.

When An American Tragedy was published in 1925, Mencken noted no basic change in any of Dreiser's distinctive traits despite the ten-year hiatus between this and his previous book. Mencken said that whole chapters could be edited out, and he noted the same old clichés and poor sentence structure. But when Mencken turned to the climax of the novel, he felt that it rose to the level of a genuine tragedy. He compared the feeling of complete reality in it to the last days of Hurstwood as told in Sister Carrie.54

Mencken saw no falling off of Dreiser's skill at depicting character in An American Tragedy. In analyzing Dreiser's approach to characterization, Mencken said that "what interests him primarily is not what people think, but what

52 Mencken, A Book of Prefaces, p. 96.

53 Mencken, "De Profundis," reprinted in Nolte, Mencken's Smart Set Criticism, p. 258.

they do." He had said that Dreiser excelled in portraying old men whose tragic helplessness symbolized "... that unfathomable cosmic cruelty which he sees as the motive power of life itself." However, Mencken had described Cowperwood of The Titan as the most real of all Dreiser's people, saying that "he is accounted for in every detail, and yet, in the end, he is not accounted for at all; there hangs about him, to the last, that baffling mysteriousness which hangs about those we know most intimately."

Shortly after Mencken began his discussion of Dreiser's early works, a promising woman writer appeared on the scene. Willa Cather's first novel, Alexander's Bridge, had caught Mencken's alert eye on its publication in 1912. While he noted her triteness and difficulty in characterizing a genius, he admitted that she gave a "very good account of herself indeed." From that time on, Mencken, in his reviews of all of her books, cited her steady progress. Her My Antonia moved Mencken to praise it as a "document in the history of American literature" and to claim that "no romantic novel ever written in America, by man or woman, is

55 Ibid., p. 381.
56 Mencken, A Book of Prefaces, p. 117.
57 Ibid., p. 118.
58 Mencken, "Her First Novel" (December, 1912), reprinted in Nolte, Mencken's Smart Set Criticism, p. 264.
one-half so beautiful. . . ."⁵⁹ Mencken was obviously delighted not only to see a new novelist arisen in this country, but a talented woman novelist as well.

In his essay "The Novel" Mencken launched into an explanation of the historical feminine connection with this particular branch of literature. After stating that there were no more than two American novelists equal to Miss Cather, he contended that women were not only "writing novels quite as good as those written by men—setting aside, of course, a few miraculous pieces by such fellows as Joseph Conrad: most of them not really novels at all, but metaphysical sonatas disguised as romances: they are actually surpassing men in their experimental development of the novel form."⁶⁰ As proof he cited My Antonia as being original in its unique treatment of an unconventional story, this claim being made the same year that Ulysses came out.⁶¹

The realism Miss Cather exhibited in her later novels was, according to Mencken, achieved only after she had abandoned the "superficial sophistication of Edith Wharton and Henry James . . . and turned to the portrayal of ordinary people."⁶² In his "Essay on Pedagogy," Mencken had asserted that a superior novel was a character sketch of reasonably

⁵⁹ H. L. Mencken, Prejudices: Third Series (New York, 1922), pp. 210-211.
⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 203.
⁶¹ Ibid., p. 204.
normal people; following this dictum, he chided Miss Cather for attempting to portray a genius as the protagonist of *Alexander's Bridge*. Later, Mencken would be able to describe Miss Cather's people as being as brilliantly alive as those of Dreiser.  

The realism that Mencken saw in *My Ántonia* was couched in the simple story of a farm girl's quite ordinary growth to maturity—Mencken called it sordid. He was convinced that the sordid aspect of Ántonia's life, including her seduction, was handled with compassion rather than with sensation in mind, saying, "Those who are intelligent enough to admire *My Ántonia* admire it simply because it is a very beautiful piece of work, and not because there is anything in it that can be distorted into support for the imbecilities of Greenwich Village." He explained that "what Miss Cather tries to reveal is the true romance that lies even there—the grim tragedy at the heart of all that dull, cow-like existence—the fineness that lies deeply buried beneath the peasant shell."  

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64 Ibid., p. 57.  
Although Willa Cather and Sinclair Lewis were both realists, their approaches to the novel were diametrically opposed. There was none of the romantic in Lewis, but Mencken welcomed his unique talent to the American scene with as much enthusiasm as he had that of Miss Cather. Upon the appearance of *Main Street* in 1920, Mencken immediately recognized that Lewis' concept of the typical American middle-class couple depicted in the novel was in notable accord with his own cynical observations. Mencken termed the Kennicotts of *Main Street* "triumphs of the national normalcy" and asserted that their divergent cultural development was "the essential tragedy of American life, and if not the tragedy, then at least the sardonic farce. . . ." To Mencken, Lewis began to represent the fruition of his desire to find a sort of American counterpart to Arnold Bennett—an astute observer and portrayer of the philistinic aspects of our society.

Two of Lewis' later novels, *Babbitt* and *Elmer Gantry*, were written about types of people Mencken had suggested would be good subjects for portrayals. Mencken was delighted with *Babbitt* although his remark that it was


"fiction only by a sort of courtesy" would seem to be censorious; however, he was trying to describe the realism Lewis had achieved in the characterization of Babbitt. Nolte states that Elmer Gantry triggered the biggest furor in American literary history, and, if that is true, then Mencken must have danced with glee. As it was, he termed it ". . . as American as goose-stepping or the mean admiration of mean things."  

Mencken found Lewis' later novels not equal to the quality of Main Street, Babbitt, Arrowsmith, and Elmer Gantry, citing insufficient motivation for the actions of the characters as the main defect. He granted that while Lewis' later characters still exhibited flashes of the old realism, the earlier constancy of their portrayals was lacking. And while still defending Lewis as a keen observer of the first rank, Mencken's later reviews reflected his belief that Lewis was simply not producing the quality of work he was capable of, although he gave qualified approval to Dodsworth and Cass Timberlane.

Mencken, despite his obvious appreciation for Lewis' better works, believed that Lewis lacked the depth of a great novelist. In other words, Mencken recognized that Lewis'  

69 Mencken, "Portrait of an American Citizen" (October, 1922), reprinted in Nolte, Mencken's Smart Set Criticism, p. 283.  
novels dealt with life not as tragedy, but as a sardonic farce. Ironically, Mencken himself looked at life much as Lewis did, however much he believed that authors like Conrad and Dreiser achieved more lasting art by taking their protagonists seriously.

Mencken closely followed the work of Sherwood Anderson, noting a lack of steady improvement somewhat similar to the career of Lewis. But whereas he saw Lewis' shortcomings as due to poor characterization, he believed Anderson's inconsistency was caused by a penchant for moralizing as well as a weakness in character motivation. However, Mencken felt that *Winesburg, Ohio* possessed a quality of realism unique in American fiction. In his review of the book Mencken termed its insight into the inner drama of people's lives "a new order of short story, half tale and half psychological anatomizing." 71 Although at the time Mencken exhibited less enthusiasm for *Winesburg* than he was later going to show for *Main Street*, he was obviously expecting further improvement in Anderson's work.

A year later Mencken noted that Anderson's inherent tendency to moralize, so apparent in his early books, seemed to be under control in his *Poor White*. 72 But three years

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72 Mencken, "The Two Andersons" (December, 1920), reprinted in Nolte, *Mencken's Smart Set Criticism*, p. 275.
later Anderson, in his *Many Marriages*, discouraged Mencken by his inability to manage the organization of a full-length novel despite his obvious supremacy as an American short story writer. Further, Mencken could not follow the process of rationalization Anderson had given his protagonist and therefore found an otherwise good story botched. However, when the novel *Dark Laughter* was published in 1925, Mencken said that Anderson had "... at last found his method, and achieved his first wholly satisfying book ..." praising its simple story, lack of speculation, and fine characterization.

Mencken's appreciation of James Branch Cabell's fiction dated back almost as early as his appreciation for Dreiser, despite their divergent approaches to fiction. And, although Cabell did not rely on Mencken's counsel as much as Dreiser and Lewis, his fame was due in large measure to Mencken's suggestion that his short story "Some Ladies and Jurgen," first published in the *Smart Set*, be expanded into a book. But before and after *Jurgen*, Mencken's reviews called attention to Cabell's stylish prose, iconoclastic humor, and vivid portrayal of characters.

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73 Mencken, "Muddleheaded Art" (July, 1923), reprinted in Nolte, *Mencken's Smart Set Criticism*, pp. 276-278.

74 Mencken, "Fiction Good and Bad," *American Mercury*, VI (November, 1925), 379.

When reviewing *Jurgen*, Mencken observed that Cabell was "not a Deep Thinker, but a Scoffer." In this connection he fancied that Cabell might wish to carry on in the tradition of the late Ambrose Bierce. However, Mencken never compared Cabell's cynicism to that of Bierce in regard to bitterness and saw an unbridgeable gap between Cabell's graceful prose and Bierce's clumsy but saucy mode of writing. Still, Mencken called Cabell "... the most acidulous of all the anti-romantics ... [whose] gaudy heroes, in the last analysis, chase dragons precisely as stockbrokers play golf." Mencken realized that Cabell's characters, no matter how realistically they were portrayed, were, like Lewis' people, not accorded the feeling that gave the stories of Dreiser and Conrad their tragic poignancy. Edmund Wilson called Cabell a "first class comic poet" who did not believe that human destiny was tragic. Mencken would probably have agreed with that description.

In contrast to Cabell, F. Scott Fitzgerald's utilization of his talent was largely a source of disappointment to Mencken. Although Mencken had encouraged Fitzgerald's career and published ten of his short stories in the Smart

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Set, he eventually grew skeptical of his ever maturing as a first-rate novelist. In a review, however, Mencken noted that *The Great Gatsby* was "a sound and laudable work" which showed evidence of hard work and progress from his earlier reliance on brilliant improvisation.\(^{79}\) As for Hemingway, Mencken believed that "The Killers" and "Fifty Grand" were good short stories and he praised the realism of *Farewell to Arms*.\(^{81}\) However, in reviewing *Death in the Afternoon*, Mencken noted that Hemingway's tendencies toward self-glorification and sensationalism detracted from his writing skill and realism.\(^{82}\) Mencken's withdrawal from literary criticism ended any further comment on Hemingway's work.

The roster of authors supported by Mencken should dispel any doubts as to his prescience as a critic; it omits few of the American novelists contemporary to Mencken now considered among our best. As the preceding pages have indicated, Mencken was enthusiastic about the merits of such contemporary authors as Dreiser, Lewis, Anderson, and Cather at a time when they were virtually unknown in America and


the realism in which they believed was still considered shabby. Not only was Mencken sensitive to the ability of these authors, he gave them personal encouragement and public support when necessary. In particular he was unstinted in support of Dreiser's right to be published and gave Lewis advice which Lewis later gratefully acknowledged. For a decade he waged a lonely campaign to raise Twain to his rightful eminence in our literature and introduced Conrad's powerful works to discerning Americans. Eventually, Mencken came to be recognized by the realists as their particular champion.

In his critical opinions Mencken left no doubt as to what his criteria for judgment were (despite what his opponents claimed) and he was consistent in their application. In the light of contemporary criticism his only notable misjudgment was of Lawrence, but Mencken was true to his standards of taste in rejecting him. While Mencken considered Joyce primarily an experimenter in prose, he at least acknowledged the brilliance of the man. His acute evaluations of Bennett and Wells, who were very popular in their time, have been borne out substantially intact by present judgment. His objectiveness toward Lewis' later works was not tempered by his earlier enthusiasm at having found an effective social critic, nor did his obvious impatience at Anderson's erratic progress dilute his appraisal of Anderson's historical position in American literature.
During the period he was active as a critic—the era he might be expected to have been most concerned with—Mencken did very well; and, as a critic concerned primarily with the advancement of American letters and more explicitly the novel, very well indeed.
CHAPTER IV

MENCKEN'S CRITICISM OF POETRY

When Mencken's criticism of poetry is compared to his criticism of prose, every indication points to his preference for prose. Critics have declared that he was unqualified to write about poetry because of his lack of knowledge and his bias, allegedly proven by his judgments of poets and his disparaging comments on the art in general. However, there is plentiful evidence that points to his having had both an adequate knowledge of and a qualified liking for poetry. Briefly his preference was for traditional forms of verse, thereby putting him at odds with new trends developing during his tenure as a critic. But, despite his adherence to an outdated concept of the art, Mencken gave a hearing to the new poets. Along with his preference for such relative unknowns as Lizette Woodworth Reese and John McClure, he also liked Sandburg, Pound, Masters, and Teasdale; so his taste was not completely counter to present evaluations.

Mencken began the criticism of poetry with his assumption of the post of book-reviewer for the Smart Set in 1908.

\[1\] A typical cross section of comment on Mencken's poetry criticism can be found in Carl R. Dolmetsch's "H. L. Mencken as a Critic of Poetry," Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien, XI (June, 1965), 83-84.
Once begun, he established a routine of reviewing poetry once every eight or ten months, covering the large number of books that had accumulated since his previous review. In addition, he occasionally wrote a piece on a poet or on some aspect of poetry; one of these essays, "Reflections on Poetry," was expanded into "The Poet and His Art" in his Prejudices series. After Mencken switched over to the Mercury, his reviews tapered off and he did only two of them in that magazine, the last appearing in 1926. Taken as a whole and considering the eighteen years during which he reviewed poetry, the volume of his poetry criticism is slight.

The aforementioned "The Poet and His Art" presented a clear exposition of Mencken's concept of poetry. In it Mencken declared that poetry was the inferior sister to prose, a statement not surprising for a man of his pragmatic, earthy leanings. He contended that while generations of authors are required to produce good prose, good poetry "... is often written by peoples and individuals whose prose is ... crude and graceless." And, in the same vein, Mencken went on to point out that poetry was traditionally and correctly linked with youth.

Mencken, continuing, claimed that prose was based primarily upon logic while poetry depended upon sensation.

2 Mencken, Prejudices: Third Series, p. 146.

3 Ibid., p. 147.
and emotion. He contended that poetry permitted nonsensicalities by affording the poet a framework for uttering falsehoods. After giving several definitions of poetry, Mencken proposed one of his own, to wit: "... poetry may be either ... caressing music or caressing assurance." Mencken praised Sidney Lanier's book *The Science of English Verse* as being the original exposition of the musical aspect of poetry, although Mencken pointed out that it did not consider the sound of words, only the element of rhythm. Rhythm, or orderliness as Mencken expressed it, plus euphonious words constituted Mencken's conception of the musical type of poetry.

Mencken cited a Dr. Prescott's book *Poetry and Dreams* for the rationale of his second type of poetry, agreeing with Dr. Prescott that poetry was "... verbal materialization of a daydream." In developing this theme, Mencken classified poetry as being either a denial of what he called objective fact, God's lack of concern for man, or the denial of what he called subjective fact, man's lack of control of his own fate. Mencken believed that man's conscious and subconscious desires often diverged and that poetry appealed to the sublimated side of man's nature.

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6 Ibid., p. 151.  
8 Ibid., p. 154.  
5 Ibid., p. 149.  
7 Ibid., p. 152.  
9 Ibid., pp. 157-159.
In keeping with his idea that poetry was a denial of facts and sometimes also a form of music, Mencken saw no need to dissect it critically. He maintained that an analysis of a poem would be "... something akin to performing an autopsy upon a butterfly—with a crowbar. Such exquisite things do not bear the prodding and vivisecting of criticism. ... I do not try to explain and defend these things intellectually; I merely tell you that they caress and enchant me emotionally."¹⁰ Inasmuch as Mencken felt that rationality was inappropriate to the creation of poetry, it is not surprising that his reviews were often conducted with a noticeable amount of levity when he felt the poems he was reviewing fell short of good art.

Mencken outraged some critics with his statements on the classical epic poems. The pretentiousness that he saw in the epics prompted him to dismiss them as being "hoary old bores," and he claimed that "they belong to the childhood of poetry, and their chief appeal is still to the childish—e.g., to pedagogues. To say that they represent a height of achievement which the poetry of our own time had not surpassed is ... ridiculous . . . ."¹¹ In commenting upon the "gorgeous unveracity" of poetry, he asked, "Suppose the

¹⁰ Mencken, "Exeunt Omnes" (December, 1919), cited in Dolmetsch, "Mencken as a Critic of Poetry," p. 94.

¹¹ Mencken, "The Troubadours A-Twitter" (May, 1915), reprinted in Nolte, Mencken's Smart Set Criticism, p. 84.
Odyssey, for example, were reduced to straightforward prose; what would be the result? Simply a long story of tedious impossibilities. So, too, with the Iliad, the Divine Comedy, Paradise Lost, and the Psalms."¹² This attitude alone would have been enough to preclude any of the traditional critics from taking him seriously as a critic of poetry.

Mencken had little to say about any of the traditional English poets except Shakespeare, and he used him primarily to support his contention that good poetry was not intellectual. He said that the appeal of the works of Shakespeare and other great poets lay in their music, claiming that "as it is intoned on the stage by actors, the poetry of Shakespeare commonly loses content altogether . . . . One can only observe that it is beautiful." Mencken, who always praised the sonnet form, concluded that "... the English language reaches in them [Shakespeare's sonnets] the topmost heights of conceivable beauty."¹³ It was just such beauty that Mencken contended it would be folly to analyze.

The more contemporary of the British poets were cited by Mencken merely as examples of varying styles. He admitted his early liking for Kipling and Tennyson, referring to Kipling's "drum beat" and Tennyson's "mellow romanticism."¹⁴

¹²Mencken, "Lizette Woodworth Reese" (May, 1910), reprinted in Nolte, Mencken's Smart Set Criticism, p. 75.
¹³Mencken, Prejudices: Third Series, pp. 164-165.
¹⁴Ibid., p. 160.
In describing Kipling's attraction, he noted that his appeal was to "... the bully and braggart type, the chest-slapping type, the patriot type." Mencken lumped Francis Thompson and Yeats together with Crashaw as being mystical poets and described Swinburne as a writer of "gorgeous blasphemies." While Mencken observed that Browning was a poet whose work was logical in content, he claimed that his chief propagandist in America was "an obscure professor of English who was also an ardent spook-chaser."

The poetry of Oscar Wilde impressed Mencken probably in great part due to the conventionality of his verse form. In contrast to the brief treatment he accorded other British poets, he wrote three pieces on Wilde. Mencken cited Wilde's "Ave Imperatrix," "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," and "Easter Day" as being "striking and beautiful poems, with music in them and the great human note." Later that same year--1910--Mencken linked "Easter Day" with Keats's sonnet on Chapman's Homer and Milton's sonnet on his blindness. As for Wilde's "Ballad of Reading Gaol," Mencken called it "... the noblest ballad in English. ..."

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15 Ibid., p. 157.  
16 Ibid., p. 156.  
17 Ibid., pp. 161-162.  
18 Mencken, "A Note on Oscar Wilde" (January, 1910), reprinted in Nolte, Mencken's Smart Set Criticism, p. 207.  
19 Mencken, "Portrait of a Tragic Comedian" (September, 1916), reprinted in Nolte, Mencken's Smart Set Criticism, p. 217.
Among the earlier American poets, Mencken concerned himself almost exclusively with Poe and Whitman, but his appreciation of Poe's art was tepid at best and his professed admiration of Whitman's poetry was not satisfactorily explained. Mencken acknowledged that Poe had written a few good poems, noting that his reputation was "... based upon five short poems. Of them, three are almost pure music. No one would venture to reduce them to plain English."\(^{20}\)

To illustrate the need for stimulation in the creative act, he said that if Poe never had been goaded to rebel he "... would probably have written poetry indistinguishable from the hollow stuff of, say, Prof. Dr. George E. Woodberry."\(^{21}\) However, Mencken considered most of Poe's work uninspired, asserting that "nine tenths of his [Poe's] poetry is so artificial that it is difficult to imagine even college tutors reading it voluntarily. ..."\(^{22}\)

Mencken accepted Poe's "The Poetic Principle" much more enthusiastically than his poems. In speaking of his aesthetic beliefs, Mencken said that Poe reacted "... against the false concept of beauty as a mere handmaiden of logical ideas. ..." Mencken maintained that Poe's better poems were faithful to this belief and that "The Poetic Principle"

\(^{20}\)Mencken, Prejudices: Third Series, p. 152.

\(^{21}\)Ibid., p. 103.

\(^{22}\)Mencken, "Fifteen Years" (December, 1923), reprinted in Nolte, Mencken's Smart Set Criticism, p. 333.
stated this concept more clearly than any other exposition. Striking points of similarity to Mencken's own beliefs are seen in Poe's disparagement of epic poems, his contention that truth and didacticism were inimical to poetry, and his belief that music was a vitally important adjunct to poetry.

While Mencken termed Whitman "the greatest poet that America had ever produced," he furnished no arguments to substantiate such a claim. On the contrary he called Whitman's verse "sonorous strophes to an imaginary and preposterous democracy." And while he said that the neglect of Whitman, Melville, and Twain constituted the "three great disgraces of American letters," he described *Leaves of Grass* as having become popular only because of its supposed salaciousness and political usefulness to native radicals. In the absence of any viable comment on Whitman's poetry, it is difficult not to conclude that Mencken was actually more

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interested in Whitman as a symbol of America's suppression of artists than as a poet.

Mencken generally treated the older contemporary British poets with respect although he mentioned them infrequently. Thomas Hardy received one of his longest and most explicit comments. Mencken stated that "his [Hardy's] verse is gnarled and even tortured; his emotions seem to encounter difficulties in breaking through the barrier of speech; at times he grows almost incoherent"; but, despite this, "the vision rises up. The feeling leaps to the reader. So the business of the poet is accomplished."  

Mencken noted that Robert Bridges' poetry had impressed the new poets in England as being archaic and offensive, but he claimed that Bridges outshone them with his dignity, skill with words, and urbane and civilized air.  

The attraction of the poetry of Hardy and Bridges, in contrast to that of Wilde, seemed to have been its rustic qualities. On the other hand, where the early Yeats was concerned, Mencken was content to describe him as "... a fantastic pale green mystic. ..."  

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30 Ibid.

31 Mencken, "On Playgoers--And on Hauptmann, Synge, and Shaw" (August, 1911), reprinted in Nolte, Mencken's Smart Set Criticism, p. 51.
Mencken welcomed the first manifestations of imagist poetry in America and discussed its practitioners in essays and reviews. He quoted Amy Lowell's statement that the aim of the imagists was to ". . . find new and striking images, delightful and unexpected forms," and he noted that they seemed to be producing excellent poetry.  

Four year later Mencken could still say that ". . . it [the imagist poetry] is honest and worthy of praise. It has, for one thing, made an effective war upon the cliché, and so purged the nation of much of its old banality in subject and phrase."  

Continuing, Mencken added that it had replaced conventionality with daring experimentation and curiosity about life, producing ". . . poetry vivid and full of human interest, as it was in the days of Elizabeth."  

Mencken's one note of dissatisfaction was that the movement had not produced any first-rate poet. 

Mencken claimed to have read nearly all of the new poetry and was well enough acquainted with the movement to describe its origins. Characteristically, he described the poetry as being neither American nor democratic.  

Although Mencken credited Whitman with having had some influence on its origins, the imagists were not content to rest content with him. In 1915, Mencken wrote:

> "The Troubadours ATwitter" (May, 1915), reprinted in Nolte, *Mencken's Smart Set Criticism*, p. 87.

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33 Ibid., p. 95.  

34 Ibid., p. 96.  

35 Ibid., p. 96.  

36 Ibid., p. 86.  

37 Ibid., p. 92.
practitioners, he gave France as its birthplace. Further, he described almost all of the better-known new poets as being under foreign influence and the poetry they produced as being "... quite beyond their [the American people's] understanding." Nevertheless, he claimed that by having been exposed to the new poetry "the relatively civilized [American] reader has been educated to something better. He has heard a music that has spoiled his ear for the old wheezing of the melodeon. He weeps no more over what wrung him yesteryear."39

By 1925, however, Mencken had come to see the imagist movement as having lost its vitality, complaining that "... the fine frenzy which seized the poets fifteen years ago has spent itself, and they are laid up for repairs. It was something of an adventure in those days--or even so lately as five years ago--to review the current verse."40 By the next year Mencken had completely retracted his previous approbation, professing his relief that "the poets are forgetting the vain uproar over form, and giving their head to matter. The imbecilities of the free verse era seem to be over. It is no longer possible to concede a lack of

38 Ibid., pp. 92-93.  
39 Ibid., p. 95.  
40 Mencken, "Poetry," American Mercury, VI (October, 1925), 252.
ideas by arranging inanities in new figures." However, Mencken probably revealed his main objection to the free verse poets when he claimed that most of them were not able to write according to the orthodox rules of prosody.

Seemingly in accordance with his pronouncement that poetry is best written by the young, Mencken generally had grown more dissatisfied with what he believed was the inability of the imagist poets to progress beyond mere novelty. Coincidentally, his observation that the movement was burning itself out came about the time he was himself becoming weary of criticism—he noted the virtual demise of the movement in the only two poetry reviews he wrote for the Mercury although he had seen the signs earlier. But while Mencken eventually became disillusioned with the imagists, he had given the leaders of the group a warm reception and a chance to air their poetry.

The cool intellectual art of T. S. Eliot and his imitators was too alien to Mencken's conception of poetry to elicit any sympathy from him. Reiterating his definition of poetry, Mencken said that "its purpose is not to establish

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42 Mencken, Prejudices: Fifth Series, p. 205.
43 Mencken, Prejudices: First Series, p. 85.
facts, but to evade and deny them."

Decrying the new poets' lack of emotion, he maintained that "poetry can never be concocted by any purely intellectual process. It has nothing to do with the intellect: it is, in fact, a violent and irreconcilable enemy to the intellect." Mencken went on to warn that if the "... denial of the bald and dreadful facts ..." is removed from poetry "... it simply ceases to be what it pretends to be [and] ... cannot stir the blood as true poetry does. ..." Elsewhere, in a rare direct reference to Eliot and the beliefs expressed in his poetry, Mencken stated off-handedly in a review of Eliot's prose book, For Lancelot Andrews, that it was "... hard to think of the author of "The Waste Land" as a genuine classicist."

Although he virtually ignored Eliot's work in his reviews, Mencken was less prejudiced toward other contemporary poets. Pound, Sandburg, Masters, Lindsay, Lowell, Robinson, and Frost were all duly reviewed with varying degrees of enthusiasm, although Lizette Woodworth Reese, Sarah Teasdale, and John McClure were the names most commonly seen in his columns.

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45 Ibid.
46 Ibid., p. 177.
Of the new poets Mencken thought Sandburg to be the best. While describing Sandburg as being often crude, uncertain, and wobbly, he said that he got "... memorable effects by astonishingly austere means, as in his famous 'Chicago Rhapsody' and his 'Cool Tombs.' And always he is thoroughly individual, a true individual, his own man." Possibly still under some influence of Kipling, Mencken described Sandburg's war poems as being "simple, eloquent and extraordinarily moving." Right behind Sandburg, Mencken ranked James Oppenheim, who he said was inspired equally by Whitman and the Old Testament. Stating that Jewish poets are inherently the most rhapsodic of the artists, Mencken credited Oppenheim at his best with having the "gigantic gusto of Solomon's Song."

Mencken was inconsistent in his appraisal of Edgar Lee Masters, but when he praised him it was for his Spoon River Anthology. When Spoon River came out in 1915, Mencken termed it "... true poetry, albeit as gnarled and unadorned as the pioneers it celebrates. It has sincerity; it has a delicate fancy; it shows a genuine feeling for beauty." Continuing, Mencken saw in it "... a sense of spaciousness, of epic sweep and dignity, of universal tragedy," despite

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49 Ibid., p. 86.
50 Ibid., pp. 86-87.
51 Ibid., p. 87.
the fact that it dealt with small men. However, four years later Mencken maintained that Spoon River was not novel, nor poignant, nor truthful, but was read for its supposed salaciousness. But in his last extensive comment on Masters, Mencken called Spoon River "... unquestionably the most eloquent, the most profound and the most thoroughly national volume of verse published in America since Leaves of Grass." Nevertheless, in the same article, he called the rest of Masters' poems "a great mass of feeble and preposterous doggerel. ... ."

The inconsistency of Mencken's criticism of Vachel Lindsay resembled that of Masters. While Mencken named Lindsay's "General William Booth Enters Heaven" a pioneering poem, he described his other early poems as "... an echo of the barbaric rhythms of the Jubilee Songs" which had degenerated into elephantine college yells. While calling Lindsay "superficially the most national" of the new poets, Mencken, referring to his recital tours, claimed "... that the yokels welcomed him, not because they were

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52 Mencken, "The Troubadours A-Twitter" (May, 1915), reprinted in Nolte, Mencken's Smart Set Criticism, p. 86.
54 Mencken, "Edgar Lee Masters," American Mercury, II (June, 1924), 250.
55 Mencken, Prejudices: First Series, p. 84.
56 Ibid., p. 89.
57 Ibid., p. 84.
interested in his poetry, but because it struck them as an amazing . . . thing, for a sane man to go about the country on any such bizarre and undemocratic business." 58 Still, after having accused the new poets of trying to rationalize poetry and trying to detach themselves from the ordinary flow of American ideas, Mencken credited Sandburg and Lindsay with having seen the folly of such alienation. Consequently, he maintained that Lindsay, along with Sandburg, had written a few poems which the literates had appreciated, 59 another way of saying that their poetry had returned to conventional sentiment.

Ezra Pound was one of the early imagists with whom Mencken did not eventually become disenchanted. As with Kipling, Hardy, and Sandburg, Pound had a roughhewn quality that bespoke his deliberately masculine approach to poetry. Mencken said of Pound’s verse, "The pale thing we commonly call beauty is seldom in them. They are rough, uncouth, hairy, barbarous, wild. But once the galloping swing of them is mastered, a sort of stark, heathenish music emerges from the noise." 60 Later, Mencken called Pound the "... most picturesque man in the [new poetry] movement--a professor turned fante, Abelard in grand opera. His knowledge is

58 Ibid., p. 94.
60 Mencken, "Ezra Pound" (April, 1911), reprinted in Nolte, Mencken’s Smart Set Criticism, p. 77.
abysmal; he has it readily on tap; moreover he has a fine ear, and has written many an excellent verse."61 However, while Mencken understood why Pound would want to rage against native provincialism, he noted that such feeling was "... fatal to the placid moods and fine other-worldliness of the poet,"62 a broad hint that poetry must be apolitical.

The poetry of Amy Lowell at first attracted Mencken. He praised her Sword Blades and Poppy Seeds as containing six or seven good poems which evoked fine visual images by subtle suggestion.63 However, he noted that "when she attempts conventional rhymes and meters Miss Lowell is a good deal less successful. Her long ballads, indeed, are frankly third rate. But in the new forms she offers work of unmistakable distinction. ..."64 Four years later Mencken dubbed her "... the schoolmarm of the movement, and vastly more the pedagogue than the artist,"65 although he granted that she "... has written perhaps half a dozen excellent pieces in imitation of Richard Aldington and John Gould Fletcher. ..." He now maintained that her reputation had

61 Mencken, Prejudices: First Series, p. 90.
62 Ibid.
63 Mencken, "The Troubadours A-Twitter" (May, 1915), reprinted in Nolte, Mencken's Smart Set Criticism, p. 88.
64 Ibid.
65 Mencken, Prejudices: First Series, p. 87.
been enhanced by her social position.\textsuperscript{66} Seven years later Mencken dismissed her by claiming that "the whole body of verse of Miss Lowell is as dead as if it had been written in Choctaw."\textsuperscript{67}

Robert Frost and Edwin Arlington Robinson got short shrift from Mencken. In his most comprehensive statement about the two poets he was not flattering.

\textbf{Frost?} A standard New England poet, with a few changes in phraseology, and the substitution of sour resignationism for sweet resignationism. Whittier without the whiskers. Robinson? Ditto, but with a politer bow. He has written sound poetry, but not much of it. The late Major-General Roosevelt ruined him by praising him . . . .\textsuperscript{68}

Mencken identified Frost's "North of Boston" as having been one of the salient documents of the new poetry movement\textsuperscript{69} but credited him with having composed perhaps only one or two poems which reached "the generality of the literate."\textsuperscript{70} In this connection Mencken did not mention Robinson at all, despite his earlier remark about his having written sound poetry. And, in another post-mortem of the movement, Mencken recalled Frost's "melancholy moans," but again did not see fit to mention Robinson.\textsuperscript{71}

\textsuperscript{66}Ibid., pp. 87-88.
\textsuperscript{67}Mencken, Prejudices: Sixth Series, p. 179.
\textsuperscript{68}Ibid., pp. 83-84. \textsuperscript{69}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{70}Mencken, Prejudices: Sixth Series, pp. 178-179.
\textsuperscript{71}Mencken, "Poetry," American Mercury, VI (October, 1925), 252.
In the eyes of the critics Mencken's loyalty toward the poems of the lowly regarded Miss Reese and John McClure overshadowed the attention he gave to the new poets. The work of these two poets, along with that of Sarah Teasdale, appeared more often in the *Smart Set* than that of any other poets and Mencken's praise of their poetry was unqualified. In comparing the old style of poetry with the new, Mencken contended that "there is no poet in the movement [the imagists] who has produced anything even remotely approaching the fine lyrics of Miss Reese, Miss Teasdale and John McClure. . . ."  

Here were poets who used the traditional rhythmical cadences combined with words chosen for their musical content.

Mencken was particularly taken with Miss Reese's poem, "Tears," calling it "... a sonnet that no other American has ever approached." He noted that "like most other poems from Miss Reese's pen, it is written in the severely plain and almost austere tongue of early England . . . the words, in brief, are short and common, but there is music in them and more music in their felicitous collocation." Dolmetsch's contention that "Tears" embodied Mencken's poetic theories can hardly be contested; besides its traditional

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74 Ibid.
form and simple words, its denial of facts was couched in a plea for release from life's sadness.

When I consider life and its few years—
A wisp of fog betwixt us and the sun;
A call to battle, and the battle done
Ere the last echo dies within our ears;
A rose choked in the grass; an hour of fears;
The gusts that past a darkening shore do beat;
The burst of music down an unlistening street
I wonder at the idleness of tears.
Ye old, old dead, and ye of yesternight
Chieftains and bards and keepers of the sheep,
By every cup of sorrow that you had,
Loose me from tears, and make me see aright
How each hath back what once he stayed to weep:
Homer his sight, David his little lad.75

Mencken's attempts at writing poetry indicate the strong attraction poetry had for him as a youth. While his enthusiasm for poetry seemingly waned later in life, it was because of his reconsideration of the value of the content of poetry, not because of any lessening of his appreciation for its sound. On the contrary, Mencken's ear for poetry, sharpened by his musical background and his love for words, became more discriminating and he understandably balked at trying to interpret what he believed was created for beauty of sound, not thought content. While this attitude made him suspect as a critic of poetry, it indicates that he may have been more truly appreciative of the art than his detractors.

In marked contrast to his ideological rapport with the new American novelists, Mencken advocated a traditional view of poetry that contemporary poets were repudiating. This

75 Ibid., p. 73.
seeming inconsistency vanishes when Mencken's literary values are considered; as has been seen, Mencken made no secret of his belief that prose was preeminent over poetry because of its nobler concern for the truth. While not usually so plainly stated except possibly by Plato, this view has been carried down through the ages and, if the truth were known, is probably the prevalent view of most people. Mencken merely had the audacity to voice such a view aloud.

On the other hand, Mencken's willingness to give an airing to the new trends in poetry and his praise of whatever poetry he saw some merit in, regardless of its form or content, was the true indication of his fairness as a critic. The publicity he gave to the rising poets of his generation in the *Smart Set* and *Mercury* had a wider range than that which could be gotten in the struggling poetry magazines of the day. Regardless of his stated opinions, in providing the poets with another public forum, Mencken did them indeed a great service.

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CHAPTER V

MENCKEN'S CRITICISM OF DRAMA

In contrast to the hubbub that attended Mencken's activities as a critic of fiction and the disdain with which he was received as a critic of poetry, the comparative dearth of comment that met his criticism of drama may seem unusual. Part of this relative obscurity is due to the fact that his taste in drama ran parallel to that of his professional contemporaries, not ahead of it as in the case of fiction or counter to it as in the case of his preferences in poetry. However, while he could not take credit for being the first American critic to recognize the talent of such Europeans as Shaw, Ibsen, Hauptmann, and Strindberg, Mencken was able to give their work a wider hearing through his books and magazine articles than those who knew of them earlier.

One reason for Mencken's comparative obscurity as a drama critic was his long association with George Jean Nathan. By virtue of his collaboration with Nathan on the Smart Set and the early Mercury, Mencken did not make criticism of drama one of his prime concerns during his career as a

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literary critic. His collaboration with Nathan would not have been of such duration had he harbored radically different views on drama or had he usurped too much of what was Nathan's primary responsibility. Still, in his years on the Smart Set, Mencken managed to voice significant and frequent comment on the art, probably prompted more by genuine interest than by duty.

Mencken began reviewing drama before taking up either the criticism of poetry or fiction. During his early newspaper days in Baltimore—from 1901 to 1906—he got his first instruction and experience in reviewing plays as one of his duties as a reporter. During this period he found time to write his longest single exposition on drama, George Bernard Shaw: His Plays (1905), which was the first book to discuss the Irishman's plays. After Mencken joined the staff of the Smart Set, he continued to write on the drama, some of which pieces later appeared in his Prejudices books. His basic theories on the art were set forth in "Reflections on the Drama," which first came out in the Smart Set in 1920 and which was also included in Prejudices: Third Series. In addition, he wrote the introductions to translations of Brieux's Blanchette and The Escape (1913) and Ibsen's Master

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2Nolte, Mencken's Smart Set Criticism, p. xxiii.

3Nolte, Mencken: Literary Critic, p. 6.
Finally, trying his own hand at drama, Mencken collaborated with Nathan on the farce *Heliogabalus: A Buffoonery in Three Acts* (1920).

Although Mencken had willingly given up reviewing plays during his newspaper work in Baltimore, his pieces on the drama in the *Smart Set* revealed the appreciation and knowledge of drama of a discriminating critic quite aware of the more significant trends of the theater. What had previously alienated Mencken from the business of drama reviewing was not necessarily the plays themselves but the ordeal of sitting through poorly acted and poorly staged productions; consequently, he preferred to read published versions of plays rather than to suffer through performances. Mencken, in those early days, had found American plays inferior to the work of the better European playwrights; and, judging from the virtual absence of American dramatists' names in his columns, he had found no sign of any native talent promising enough to give his attention to.

The plays of such European favorites of Mencken as Ibsen, the early Shaw, and Hauptmann were notable for their realism and simple themes, qualities he looked for in novels.

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In fact, Mencken envisioned the requisites of a good play as being similar to those of a good novel—believable characterization, lack of didacticism, a sense of the uncertainty of life—but with these qualities presented in a much briefer context. More particularly he believed that the brevity of a play, coupled with its function as entertainment, made it a more limited art form than the novel and a more logical vehicle for the ridiculous aspects of life than its tragic aspects.

Mencken pointed out that the modern dramatist, while commendably trying to foster realism, omitted the interpretive or descriptive devices that were formerly used to aid the development of plot. Consequently, he argued that a play could represent with thoroughness little more than a comparatively short episode; but, even then, it often left the audience harboring widely differing interpretations as to what occurred or deducing nonexistent meaning from what was said. For the playwright to forestall wide misinterpretation, Mencken maintained that he was forced to work with plots and ideas that were actually simple, easily recognizable platitudes that concerned the emotions rather than abstract ideas. He put it thus: "The best a dramatist can hope to do is to

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6 Mencken, Prejudices: Third Series, p. 126.
7 Ibid., p. 308.
8 Ibid., p. 300.
9 Ibid., pp. 304-305.
10 Ibid., p. 300.
give poignant and arresting expression to an idea so simple that the average man will grasp it at once, and so banal that he will approve it in the next instant."¹¹ In support of this belief, Mencken claimed that platitudes were found necessary by even the most successful of the dramatists, including Shakespeare, whom he proclaimed as the greatest of them all.¹²

As an added rationale for plots with easily digestible subject matter, Mencken cited drama as being the only form of literature composed for the express purpose of having a group of people appreciate it en masse. Put another way, he saw drama as being the only truly "democratic" art form¹³—an uncomplimentary word in his Nietzschean lexicon. And, belittling the difficulty that the creation of drama entailed, Mencken declared that whenever a writer has essayed both the novel and drama, he had found the drama a much less demanding exercise, and cited Arnold Bennett as a case in point.¹⁴ Probably Mencken's involvement in the writing of Heliogabalus was motivated primarily by his desire to prove the ease with which a play could be composed.

During the formative period of Mencken's philosophy he noted similarities between Shaw's beliefs and his own. So it was more than coincidence that in his book, George Bernard

¹¹Ibid.
¹²Ibid., p. 308.
¹³Ibid., p. 299.
¹⁴Ibid., p. 304.
Shaw: His Plays, Mencken asserted that Shaw was the ideologi-
cal descendant of Darwin, Spencer, Nietzsche, and Huxley, the same men whom he later acknowledged as being among his own intellectual mentors. He noted that after Darwin commonly held virtues began to be challenged and that Shaw followed Ibsen's example in adapting this questioning of morals to drama. It is apparent from the tone of the introduction of his book on Shaw that the iconoclastic characteristic of Shaw's plays caught Mencken's fancy as quickly as it had shocked the playgoers. Still, Mencken admired the Irishman's skill at creating drama apart from the ideological overtones it included.

Shaw's most common dramatic device, as Mencken saw it, was the presentation of "the current conflict between orthodoxy and heterodoxy" with characters representing a virtue as a vice in disguise or vice versa. Mencken noted that, with the exception of his prefaces, Shaw did not moralize in his plays; on the contrary, he presented the situations in such a way that the spectator would see new rules of human conduct contrasted with the old, enabling him to draw his own conclusion as to the validity of either point of view—in other words, Shaw wanted to make the

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15 H. L. Mencken, George Bernard Shaw: His Plays (Boston, 1905), p. x.
16 Ibid., p. xii.
17 Ibid., p. xvi.
18 Ibid., p. xii.
19 Ibid., p. xiv.
spectator think. \(^{20}\) In this connection Mencken emphasized that "as long as a dramatist is faithful to his task of depicting human life as he sees it, it is of small consequence whether the victory in the dramatic conflict goes to one side or the other."\(^{21}\) Further, he said that instead of concerning himself about which view prevails, the playwright should concentrate instead on a realistic presentation of the struggle.\(^{22}\)

In his book on Shaw, Mencken concluded that many of Shaw's plays were not destined for popularity in the United States for a number of reasons. He pointed out that their presumed intellectuality was attractive only to a limited number of people, that plays such as Mrs. Warren's Profession concerned an unmentionable subject, and that Shaw's satirical wit was unpopular with the average playgoer who was understandably sensitive about seeing his own doctrines and idiosyncracies made light of.\(^{23}\)

While he touched on the origins of Shaw's philosophy in the first part of the introduction, Mencken devoted most of his attention to his technique of dramatizing. He briefly described the action of all of the plays, carefully analyzing the principal characters and the underlying philosophy of each situation. Of the fourteen plays he reviewed, Mencken

\(^{20}\)Ibid., p. xxiv.  \(^{21}\)Ibid., p. xix.  \(^{22}\)Ibid., p. xx.  \(^{23}\)Ibid., p. xxvi.
declared that *Man and Superman* was Shaw's masterpiece and expressed admiration for the wit, characterization, dialogue, and structure of *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, *Caesar and Cleopatra*, *Candida*, and *A Man of Destiny*.

However, in subsequent articles in the *Smart Set*, Mencken devoted the bulk of his comment to Shaw the man, discussing such things as the means by which Shaw gained his notoriety, his increasing didacticism, and the allegation that his true nature was generally misunderstood. In a review of Chesterton's book on Shaw in 1910, Mencken omitted any comment on Shaw as a playwright, but instead paid tribute to his proficiency in the art of "stirring up of the animals." By 1911, Mencken noted the same failing in Shaw that he later saw in H. G. Wells--the tendency to take himself too seriously. While he admitted that Shaw still confined his comments to his prefaces, Mencken claimed that his plays were becoming obviously the means to emphasize the ideas of the prefaces rather than the other way around, as had been the case previously. In a 1916 article entitled "Shaw as Platitudinarian," Mencken refuted the popular belief that Shaw was in any way heretical or even truly Irish, but

24 Mencken, "Chesterton's Picture of Shaw" (January, 1910), reprinted in Nolte, *Mencken's Smart Set Criticism*, p. 50.

contended that he was in reality a puritanical Scottish Presbyterian devoid of the romanticism so commonly attributed to the Irish. Ten years later in a letter to Upton Sinclair, Mencken predicted that if Shaw were remembered fifty years hence it would "... be for his earlier plays. ...".

Whereas Mencken considered the later Shaw more of a political and intellectual oddity than a playwright, he always considered Ibsen a single-minded dramatist. Mencken called Ibsen "... a first-rate journeyman dramatist, perhaps the best that ever lived." He observed that throughout the course of Ibsen's career, his audiences had accused him of attacking various aspects of society through the medium of his drama, and that the resultant furor over the themes of the plays had obscured the novelty of their structure. Noting that while it took some twenty years for Ibsen's plays to be universally recognized by playgoers as aesthetic creations in fact as well as by intention, Mencken claimed that Ibsen's fellow dramatists quietly began adopting his changes almost immediately. He listed Jones,

26 Mencken, "Shaw as Platitudinarian" (August, 1916), reprinted in Nolte, Mencken's Smart Set Criticism, p. 63.


29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., p. x.
Pinero, Shaw, Hauptmann, Gorki, Hervieu, Brieux, and many lesser dramatists as having deserted Scribe's example in favor of Ibsen's. By 1917, said Mencken, performances in the manner of Scribe were being laughed at by audiences.  

The initial reaction of theatergoers to Ibsen's plays seemed to Mencken to have been ironically a stimulus to Ibsen's career. He maintained that Ibsen, angered at repeated attempts by the public to read nonexistent significance into each of his plays, would respond by producing another play burlesquing the previous one. Hence, when A Doll's House was purported to advocate free love, he wrote Ghosts to ridicule the aroused moralists. When this ploy failed to quiet the hubbub, he brought out The Wild Duck to ridicule the self-styled cognoscenti of drama and Hedda Gabler, which Mencken claimed was deliberately composed of the stalest, most worked-over plots of his fellow dramatists, to quiet charges of iconoclasm.  

—and all the while Ibsen was refining his technique. Mencken cited the contents of Ibsen's notes as furnishing irrefutable evidence of his complete lack of desire to stimulate reforms through the medium of his plays and also as giving proof of his lack of preoccupation with symbolism.

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31 Ibid., pp. x-xi.
32 Ibid., p. viii.
33 Ibid., pp. vii-viii.
Ibsen's letters convinced Mencken that, while Ibsen concentrated on the practical aspects of drama, he was not overly concerned with a story as long as it involved conflict. He quoted Ibsen as saying, "It was not my desire to deal in this play [Hedda Gabler] with so-called problems. What I wanted to do was to depict human beings, human emotions, and human destinies, upon a groundwork of certain of the social conditions and principles of the present day." Mencken described Ibsen's technique as the abandonment of monologues, asides, couriers, and gossiping minor characters as superfluous expediencies and letting the story tell itself. Mencken said that, as a result, the audience "... found its nerves racked by a glimpse through a terrifying keyhole."

Mencken viewed the public misinterpretation of Strindberg's art as having been similar to that which plagued Ibsen. After commenting disparagingly on Strindberg's gullibility and ingenuousness, Mencken observed that "... he had, for all his folly, a considerable native skill at devising effective stage-plays—a talent that some men seem to be born with—and under cover of it he acquired his reputation as a thinker." While he judged Strindberg's

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34 Ibid., p. ix.  
35 Ibid., p. xii.  
36 Ibid., pp. ix-x.  
37 Ibid., p. x.  
The Father a masterpiece of drama and his Lady Julie, The Stronger, The Link, The Dream Play, and both parts of The Dance of Death all "extremely clever plays,"\(^{39}\) he indicated that their popular success was attributable to their platitudinous or sensational material and only indirectly due to their clever structure.\(^{40}\)

Mencken said much less approbatory things about Strindberg and his audiences than he said about his plays. In a statement reminiscent of comment he had made about Ibsen, Mencken claimed that the "defective powers of observation and reflection" of Strindberg's playgoers were responsible for the supposed intellectual content attributed to his plays.\(^{41}\) Mencken dwelt at length on Strindberg's tempestuous private life, made public by the dramatist's tendency to include autobiographical material in his plays and novels, and seemed to be fascinated by Strindberg's exotic enthusiasms, marital battles, and ultimate insanity.\(^{42}\) But while Mencken appeared to be trying to find something disparaging to say about Strindberg's talent for drama, the worst he could

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\(^{41}\)Ibid.

manage was the assertion that his poorer plays were shallow and silly.\footnote{Ibid., p. 67.}

The introduction Mencken wrote for two of Eugene Brieux's plays was not as approving as that which he did on Ibsen. However, he gave guarded assent to Shaw's evaluation of Brieux "... as the most important dramatist west of Russia," following Ibsen's death.\footnote{Ibid., p. iv.} His objection did not concern the structure of Brieux's drama: Mencken, while unsure of the debt Brieux's innovations in the French theater owed to the example of Ibsen,\footnote{Ibid., p. v.} approved of Brieux's movement toward realism, noting that his later plays had gone so far as to have neither formal beginnings nor endings.\footnote{Ibid., p. vi.}

Mencken stated that he chose Brieux's \textit{Blanchette} and \textit{The Escape} for publication in America because of their significance as milestones in Brieux's career and their typical representation of both his weaknesses and his talents.\footnote{Ibid., p. iv.}

While Mencken pointed out that Brieux's biting iconoclasm reminded him favorably of Ibsen,\footnote{Ibid., p. i.} he expressed dislike of Brieux's ideology. Unlike either Shaw or Ibsen, Brieux supported the bourgeois values of his countrymen, and Mencken, in character, viewed this conservatism as a serious

\footnotesize{\begin{tabular}{ll}
\textit{Eugene Brieux, Blanchette and The Escape}, preface by H. L. Mencken (Boston, 1913), p. i. \\
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weakness. In this connection Mencken accused him of lacking either understanding or sympathy for the targets of his barbs and of overexaggerating the positions of his unsympathetic characters. Before continuing to a brief discussion of all his plays, Mencken noted that Brieux's attacks were not against basic moral values but against what Mencken called their "modern embellishments," and he ended by branding him a "stolid and God-fearing man of the people."

Mencken contrasted the work of Gerhart Hauptmann and Hermann Sudermann, playwrights contemporary to each other who were both influenced by Ibsen's realism. While Mencken scornfully observed that Sudermann's *Heimat* was the most successful German play to appear after the romantic movement died and "... the most eloquent of all proofs, perhaps, of his lack of force and originality as a dramatist," he elsewhere named Hauptmann's *The Weavers* as "one of the most striking and influential of modern German plays."

Mencken devoted a chapter in his *Prejudices: First Series* to Sudermann. The main premise of the piece was that Sudermann vacillated between romanticism and realism and

49 Ibid., p. vii.  
50 Ibid.  
51 Ibid., p. vi.  
52 Ibid., p. ix.  
that his novels and dramas—notably *Heimat*—reflected his indecision and inability to master either point of view. On the other hand, Mencken declared that Hauptmann was successful with both approaches. In his "Reflections on the Drama," Mencken noted with approval Hauptmann's transition from the "drama of ideas" to the portrayal of emotions, saying that "... his genius burst through the narrow bounds of mob ratiocination..." As for Sudermann, he concluded by exhorting the reader to ignore his plays and concentrate instead on his superb short stories.

Not all of the playwrights Mencken admired were exclusively realists: John Millington Synge's drama combined romanticism and realism to produce plays described as poetic. Mencken observed that critics generally accepted Synge as a dramatic genius despite his short career and limited body of works. While Mencken took issue with those who he said called Synge "the greatest dramatist working in English since the age of Elizabeth," he allowed that Synge, had he lived longer, undoubtedly would have been indeed

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close to the top rank in drama.\textsuperscript{59} He pointed to Synge as a preeminent stylist, but declared that his character studies and technique of drama, while adequate, had been outdone by Ibsen, Strindberg, and Galsworthy. Yet he termed \textit{The Playboy of the Western World} an effective and well-constructed comedy and said that \textit{Riders to the Sea} "... structurally, is an almost perfect piece of craftsmanship."\textsuperscript{60}

It was the language in the plays of Synge that strained Mencken's capacity for praise. In describing the effect of \textit{Riders to the Sea} and \textit{The Well of the Saints}, Mencken predicted that the reader would "... go drunk with the sheer music of the words, as you go drunk over the Queen Mab speech in \textit{Romeo and Juliet}, or Faustus's apostrophe to Helen, or the One Hundred and Third Psalm."\textsuperscript{61} Although he noted the Irish-English richness of language in the plays of Lady Gregory, Lennox Robinson, and Seumas O'Kelly, he credited Synge with having been the sole Neo-Celt to capture its full musical qualities. Mencken tacitly acknowledged the poetic quality of Synge's dramatic dialogue when he said that any attempt to analyze it rationally—as with poetry—would be fruitless.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{59}Mencken, "The Greatest Stylist of Modern Times" (October, 1912), reprinted in Nolte, \textit{Mencken's Smart Set Criticism}, p. 70.

\textsuperscript{60}Ibid., p. 71.\textsuperscript{61}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{62}Ibid.
Mencken made no secret about his low opinion of most of the native drama. He maintained that the theater people and dramatists with brains, ideas, and professional knowledge were much more common in Europe than in America, saying that "... some of the least of them are almost as good as our best."\(^6\) He spoke sarcastically of Augustus Thomas' "corn-doctor magic and Sunday-school platitudes,"\(^6\) and virtually ignored Clyde Fitch. But, despite Mencken's general disparagement of Greenwich Village letters, he pronounced Eugene O'Neill's one-act plays, Rita Wellman's *The Gentile Wife*, and Zoe Akins' *Papa* superior drama which somehow had avoided the studied Village rebelliousness.\(^5\)

Mencken recognized O'Neill's pioneering role in American drama. In looking back at the changes in the theater during his years with the *Smart Set*, he said that "if Eugene O'Neill had come to Broadway with *The Emperor Jones* or *The Hairy Ape*, he would have been sent to Edward E. Rose to learn the elements of his trade."\(^6\) But while acknowledging the innovative element of O'Neill's techniques, Mencken left the discussion of O'Neill's techniques and the promotion of O'Neill's

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\(^6\)Ibid.


\(^6\)Mencken, "Fifteen Years" (December, 1923), reprinted in Nolte, *Mencken's Smart Set Criticism*, p. 328.
career to Nathan.\textsuperscript{67} And Mencken probably revealed his true feelings about O'Neill's art when he said, "of all the dramatists of any importance . . . he interests me the least."\textsuperscript{68} Still, the most tangible role Mencken played in furthering modern American drama was his part in the publication of three of O'Neill's one-act plays in the \textit{Smart Set}, but Nathan should get as much credit as Mencken in this connection. Moreover, it was Nathan who was responsible for further aiding O'Neill by arranging for the first production of his plays on Broadway.\textsuperscript{69}

Mencken's preoccupation with European dramatists was not unique among critics of that time. American drama was just beginning to emerge from the social comedies and romantic plays of the past, and no American dramatists of any lasting consequence existed during the transition to realistic and contemporary drama. Consequently, it was not until O'Neill arrived on the scene that the American theater was notably influenced by other than the works of such men as Shaw and Ibsen. Mencken, like most of the other critics of drama, accepted this situation with equanimity and did not agitate unduly for the development of home-grown dramatists of similar persuasion. He apparently felt that the increasing acceptance of realism in the theater would, in itself, be

\textsuperscript{67}Mencken, \textit{Letters of H. L. Mencken}, p. 81.  
\textsuperscript{68}Ibid., p. 336.  
\textsuperscript{69}Ibid., p. 82.
sufficient to encourage nascent playwrights. Mencken's writings on drama indicate that he was primarily interested in accelerating the acceptance of realistic drama by further acquainting his readers with the better European dramatists.
Mencken is justly remembered as the critic who was most responsible for freeing American literature from the bonds of genteeelism that had held it for so long. His spectacular polemical writing, commonly judged to have been his most effective weapon in this formidable undertaking, has tended to overshadow his extensive literary criticism of these years. His criticism, when commented upon, has generally been depreciated. He has been called a mere reviewer, and some have said that he lacked standards, taste, and judgment.

This study has had as its rationale the premise that Mencken's criticism is more significant than has been generally recognized. Specifically it has taken the position that he was a discerning judge of fiction during the twenty years that he was most active as a critic and that his judgments were not only apt but were based upon specific criteria. Most of his criticism was devoted to fiction, but this was consistent with his view that fiction afforded the author a wider range than drama. And poetry, as Mencken saw it, was a minor art, one that offered relief from the realities of existence by casting over them a veil of illusion and lulling the reader with its melodies.
Mencken's significance as a critic rests upon his early recognition and praise of writers who are today considered among the best of the realistic-naturalistic tradition. Reviewing books by hundreds of authors, he showed notable perception in singling out for praise many who have become eminent. He asserted the genius of Mark Twain at a time when academic critics considered him a mere entertainer. He praised Conrad before that writer had an extensive audience. For the controversial Dreiser, he was mentor, critic, defender, and propagandist. Aside from his recognition of these major figures, he was a discerning critic of such English realists and naturalists as Wells, Bennett, and Moore. His early praise of Willa Cather, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, and F. Scott Fitzgerald demonstrates the soundness of his taste. All of these writers to a considerable degree conformed with his standards of faithfulness to life and objectivity. However, Dreiser conspicuously fell short on a third criterion—style. Mencken complained much of Dreiser's clumsiness and wordiness. Yet he ranked Dreiser with Twain and Conrad as a modern giant.

Mencken was not the complete critic. The nature of his reviews, twenty to thirty books considered within the bounds of some three thousand words, forbade analysis and the discussion of criteria. Even his essays lack the sustained analysis of academic criticism. But he did discuss principles of criticism and standards of fiction in such longer pieces
as "Criticism of Criticism of Criticism" and the essay on Dreiser in his volume of Prefaces; and the judgments made in his reviews are notably consistent with the criteria enunciated in these longer reviews and essays.

Like many other critics, he found little in contemporary American drama to interest him. His earliest literary criticism praised the technical skill with which Shaw and Ibsen had fashioned their plays and the realism which pervaded them. His subsequent comment on the drama continued to be primarily concerned with European playwrights. However, he recognized Eugene O'Neill as the first American playwright to use the new techniques of the theater, and O'Neill's work was published in both the Smart Set and the Mercury.

As a critic of poetry, Mencken's range of appreciation was limited. He enjoyed the romantic and melodic in poetry, praising the work of Lizette Woodworth Reese and Sara Teasdale above that of their contemporaries. He appreciated certain rugged qualities in the verse of Bridges and the early Pound and extended a limited welcome to the experiments of the early imagists.

In the main, Mencken's taste was conservative. He labored to extend the bounds of the permissible in fiction, but a D. H. Lawrence offended his sensibilities. He could appreciate the techniques of naturalism and even expressionism in the drama, but he was noncommittal on Joyce's stream-of-consciousness and the innovations of Eliot.
Mencken's limitations as a critic are not difficult to discern. As a judge of poetry, he was bound by a narrow concept of that art. As a critic of drama, he increased our awareness of the work of foreign writers but did little to distinguish the quality of our native playwrights. In comparison with our contemporary formalist critics, he was deficient in analysis of specific works in all of the genres. Moreover, his taste was too conservative for him to appreciate the innovations in literature that came with Eliot and Joyce. However, in judging those writers whose break with tradition was not so pronounced, he demonstrated a singular ability to distinguish genius. In that most difficult of tasks—the day-to-day judgment of new writers and new works—few critics have displayed a higher quality of taste and judgment.
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