

“KNOCK
DOWN
SINNERS:”

H.L. Mencken and the Puritan Legacy in
“Puritanism as a Literary Force”

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Introduction

H.L. Mencken was, in a word, scathing. Perhaps it is harsh to call him eristic, but his chief power was that of being “the foremost American dissenter and nay-sayer.”¹ He was to American culture what the sea is to stone; to the nation’s philosophical bedrock, he was ever a vector of erosion. Standing on the precipice of world-changing war in 1917, Mencken looked backward at America’s religious origin and traced its threads to the stormy present. His “Puritanism as a Literary Force” is remarkable for its acknowledgement of theological continuity in American history. Puritanism, he said, was still alive centuries after its supposed fall. But the implications of this original, omnipresent faith were grave – injurious to the republic. Mencken’s academic downfall comes from this irresponsible interpretation of Puritan ideal through the lens of his own disapproval. This paper investigates Mencken’s bold criticisms of Puritanism, evaluates his vision of Puritan implication, and argues for the reassignment of his ideas to the field of retrospective sociology, not academic history.

Puritanism, Intellectualism, and Politics

To his credit, Mencken does correctly establish Puritanism as America’s theological foundation. One twentieth-century study distilled the words of Nathaniel Hawthorne, who famously reflected on Puritan influence: the Puritans “laid the foundations of American liberty.”² Mencken himself leans on Dr. Leon Kellner’s “excellent little history of American literature” and its emphasis on Puritan success “in the wilds of North America.”³ Mencken is also correct

¹ William E. Cain, “A Lost Voice of Dissent: H. L. Mencken in Our Time,” *The Sewanee Review* 104, no. 2 (1996): 229–47, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27547187>.

² Barriss Mills, “Hawthorne and Puritanism,” *The New England Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (March 1948): 85, <https://doi.org/10.2307/361158>.

³ Henry Louis Mencken, *A Book of Prefaces*, *Google Books* (Knopf, 1917), 197, https://www.google.com/books/edition/A_Book_of_Prefaces/e7EIAAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&printsec=frontcov

that the Puritans elevated God to a “luxuriant demonology... a sort of devil, ever wary and wholly merciless.”⁴ Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* paints God in the strokes of his wicked wrath: worshippers were not “God-loving” but rather “God-fearing.”⁵ Indeed, wrote Max Weber, “the doctrine of predestination [w]as the dogmatic background of the Puritan morality.”⁶ Life on Earth was, for many Puritans, a prelude to Hell. This prelude to Hell, Mencken rightly argues, characterized American life for decades – even centuries – after the Puritans reached their zenith.

But Mencken errs in his attempt to link Puritan moralism with American intellectualism. He connects the “Puritan’s utter lack of aesthetic sense” to contemporary politics, which “left the cultivation of belles lettres, and of... the arts... to women and admittedly second-rate men.”⁷ While Puritan maxims did pervade nineteenth-century American politics, their effect cannot be extrapolated to the general de-gentrification of literary or artistic appreciation. In the period following the frontier but preceding earnest urbanization, lyceums – public organizations which sponsored intellectual lectures and debates – sprung up across the prairie. “Lyceums,” wrote the intellectual scholar, Angela G. Ray, “represented the world... as an arena for political decision making by self-interested elites.” One of the lenses through which these “elites” learned of their

er; Leon Kellner, *American Literature*, trans. Julia Franklin (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1915), 40, https://www.google.com/books/edition/American_Literature/6TVLAAAIAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0. Cited in: Henry Louis Mencken, *A Book of Prefaces*, *Google Books* (Knopf, 1917), 197, https://www.google.com/books/edition/A_Book_of_Prefaces/e7EIAAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&printsec=frontcover.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter: A Romance*, *Google Books* (1850; repr., H. Altemus Company, 1892), 71, https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Scarlet_Letter/zsoVAAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0. Among works of post-peak Puritan analysis, *The Scarlet Letter* has no popular rival. In Dimmesdale may be seen both the appeal and fall of Puritan faith.

⁶ Max Weber and University of California Libraries, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, *Internet Archive* (New York : Scribner, 1930), 125, <https://archive.org/details/protestantethics00webe>.

⁷ Henry Louis Mencken, *A Book of Prefaces*, *Google Books* (Knopf, 1917), 213, https://www.google.com/books/edition/A_Book_of_Prefaces/e7EIAAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&printsec=frontcover.

world was “artistry.”⁸ The lyceum may have met on religious grounds - Springfield’s, for example, frequently convened at the Baptist church.⁹ But the lyceum was, at heart, a secular institution. The “elites” who would enrich America’s political soul in the mid-nineteenth century were educated in public discourse and enjoyed creativity for its own sake; they admired art and eloquence. By confining the written and visual arts to society’s second best, Mencken excommunicates Ray’s “elites” and ignores the nuance that even a religious culture could permit the rise of a secular intellect.

To Mencken, Puritan artlessness – “philistinism” – existed in spite of the nation’s “best imaginative talent.”¹⁰ History provides something different: in spite of Puritan philistinism, the nation’s “best imaginative talent” chose to enjoy art anyway. Lincoln, whom Mencken considered among America’s peak politicians, was introduced to Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* by law students and his free-verse-loving partner, William Herndon.¹¹ Whitman, according to Mencken, was “disdained” by an America full of philistines. The poet was unmanly – someone for the women to read.¹² But it was “the women” who, according to one account,

⁸ Angela G. Ray, *The Cosmopolitan Lyceum: Lecture Culture and the Globe in Nineteenth Century America*, ed. Tom F. Wright, *JSTOR* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 38, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vkbbg.5>. Ray’s attempt to itemize the lyceum curriculum is useful to the historian hoping to determine its role in society.

⁹ See: *Sangamo Journal / Illinois State Journal*, *Sangamo Journal / Illinois State Journal* (Springfield, Illinois, 1836-1842), <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=cl&cl=CL1&sp=SJO>. Springfield’s *Young Men’s Lyceum* ran ads here, most notably during the mentioned years; contained were brief outlines of the anticipated discourse and a basic date/location. The Baptist church appeared often as a meeting location.

¹⁰ Henry Louis Mencken, *A Book of Prefaces*, *Google Books* (Knopf, 1917), 213, https://www.google.com/books/edition/A_Book_of_Prefaces/e7EIAAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&printsec=frontcover.

¹¹ Daniel Mark Epstein, *Lincoln and Whitman : Parallel Lives in Civil War Washington* (New York: Random House, 2005), 6–11. Epstein relies on existing accounts, such as those of Henry Bascom Rankin, under the condition that other scholars have done so before. It is for this reason that his work is a safe one to cite in such murky matters as Lincoln’s early literary preferences.

¹² Henry Louis Mencken, *A Book of Prefaces*, *Google Books* (Knopf, 1917), 213-14, https://www.google.com/books/edition/A_Book_of_Prefaces/e7EIAAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&printsec=frontcover.

would have “purified [Whitman] in fire” and Lincoln who “commended the new poet!”¹³ Figurative, progressive literature was not unmanly, nor was it shunned from America’s expanding political circles. Mencken’s idea of the “belle lettre” is wrong; the predominant men of nineteenth-century politics were both acutely aware of and integrally interested in fine literature.

Puritanism and Anti-Slavery Rhetoric

“It was during the long contest against slavery,” wrote Mencken, “that this gigantic supernaturalization of politics reached its most astounding heights.”¹⁴ What did he mean by “supernaturalization?” He wrote that America’s greatest politicians, “beginning with the anti-slavery agitators,” were those who “have been most adept at twisting the ancient guards and shibboleths of Puritanism to partisan uses.”¹⁵ Mencken’s “supernaturalization” was the exploitation of (specifically Puritan) religion to explain the present in the context of politics. But Mencken’s wish to identify Puritan ancestry in America’s “anti-slavery agitators” is questionable, at best. The specialist, Bernard Rosenthal, wrote that “agitation in puritan New England for the abolition of slavery was minimal.” Nonetheless, anti-slavery rhetoric was not entirely uncommon and descended at times from the pulpit itself. What was the nature of this rhetoric? Unfortunately, those “who opposed slavery on theological grounds [...] lacked

¹³ Henry Bascom Rankin, *Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln*, Google Books (G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1916), 124, 126, https://www.google.com/books/edition/Personal_Recollections_of_Abraham_Lincol/pD1plf51IUC?hl=en&gbpv=. Cited in: Daniel Mark Epstein, *Lincoln and Whitman : Parallel Lives in Civil War Washington* (New York: Random House, 2005), 10-11.

¹⁴ Henry Louis Mencken, *A Book of Prefaces*, Google Books (Knopf, 1917), 213, https://www.google.com/books/edition/A_Book_of_Prefaces/e7ElAAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&printsec=frontcover.

¹⁵ Ibid, 212.

sufficient power to effect their wishes.”¹⁶ “The real cause [of abolition],” wrote John Adams, “was the multiplication of labouring white people, who would no longer suffer the rich to employ these sable rivals so much to their injury.”¹⁷ Theological anti-slavery thought was overwhelmed by economic anti-slavery thought. Even under the problematic assumption that Puritanism was theologically anti-slavery, the faith still tolerated a slave economy. As an anchor of American anti-slavery rhetoric, Puritanism is a weak choice.

Later developments suggest Puritan predestination fueled social Darwinism with greater ferocity than ever it did abolitionism. Predestination – the idea that most were bound for Hell and some for Heaven from before birth – theologically justified earlier claims like those made by Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, who spoke of “natural” slavery and subordination in the Americas.¹⁸ In other words, those who were predestined to Hell deserved slavery on Earth. The idea that slavery was an arm of God’s wrath allowed Puritans to sleep at night without fully wrestling with the immorality of slavery. When institutional slavery fell in 1865, predestination allowed the Puritans’ descendants to cite divine judgement as a reason for oppression. When Spencer argued for racial differentiation, the Puritan tradition had already primed Americans to separate the supposed “haves” from the “have nots.” Puritanism was stronger as a force of racial segregation than it was as a force of racial unification.

Mencken is not wrong that anti-slavery rhetoric was exceptionally zealous. But he has ignored the religious pluralism that characterized America after the decline of New England’s institutional influence on frontier faith. Consider another group: The Quakers, who, according to

¹⁶ Bernard Rosenthal, “Puritan Conscience and New England Slavery,” *The New England Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (March 1973): 62, 80, <https://doi.org/10.2307/364886>.

¹⁷ John Adams to Jeremy Belknap, March 21, 1795. Cited in: *Ibid*, 80.

¹⁸ Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, “*Democrates Alter, Or, on the Just Causes for War against the Indians*,” Columbia.edu, 1544, <http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/sepulved.htm>.

Professor Kristen Block, grappled with the issue of slavery for generations. While only some early Quaker wills – she studied those in the Caribbean specifically – permitted selective abolition after the master’s death, later generations positioned themselves firmly against slavery, even at the expense of the sect’s popularity.¹⁹ Some of America’s earliest white abolitionists were Quakers. So, while American politics were indeed “supernaturalized,” it is unwise to connect popular *Puritan* supernaturalization to the origin of popular abolitionism, a movement predominantly defended by the Quaker tradition. In short, Mencken could have attributed anti-slavery rhetoric to a better cause.

Puritan Evolution and Tradition

What follows is another discussion of literature – of Whitman, Twain, and the like – which can only be described as the domain of the critic. This paper makes no attempt to evaluate his literary preferences. Of note, however, is what comes next. Mencken arrives at a phenomenal cultural diagnosis: while “elder Puritanism” was “self-accus[atory],” “neo-Puritanism... aim[ed] [...] not to lift up saints but to knock down sinners.”²⁰ It is here that his view of Puritan implication can be taken as truth. “Neo-Puritanism” was not a faith in and of itself but rather a nondenominational force of thought. The greatest manifestation of this vindictive culture arrived well after Mencken originally wrote these lines in the form of McCarthyism, making him something of a prophet. The culprit was “prosperity,” bred by post-Civil War industrialization, which gave the neo-Puritans the power to look judgmentally down on those beneath.²¹

¹⁹ Kristen Block, interview with Class of Micah Oelze, October 28, 2022.

²⁰ Henry Louis Mencken, *A Book of Prefaces*, *Google Books* (Knopf, 1917), 231-32, https://www.google.com/books/edition/A_Book_of_Prefaces/e7EIAAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&printsec=frontcover.

²¹ *Ibid*, 236.

Yet, as ever, Mencken was not content with this base truth. He reached almost immediately for hyperbole: “evangelization” institutions like the Y.M.C.A. “swelled to the proportions of a Standard Oil Company, a United States Steel Corporation.”²² This time, though, the methodological sin is not nearly as detracting; exaggeration is better than generalization and is tolerable in a piece so satirical as this. To external correction and internal complacency, society had grown accustomed; to convince others of their faults was to convince them of your own perfection. Life was a war between the accusers and the accused; it was won always by the former and lost by the latter. And so came the age of legislative neo-Puritanism. So came the Comstock Postal Act, the Mann Act, the Webb Act, the New York Adultery Act.²³ So came the laws that regulated behavior – social and sexual – according to the neo-Puritan ideal. The government became the chief accuser in all the land. In his own way, Mencken was ready to protest at once – he was quick to the press.

Conclusion

It is difficult to determine Mencken’s role in modern academic historiography, despite his own scholarly aspirations. He is certainly an important example of the American contrarian. But he was not a trained historian; his errors are at best ignorant and at worst misleading. So where does he fit? In the context of retrospective sociology, even these errors are valuable. When studying culture, societal thought, and social interaction, as sociologists do, faulty reasoning can reveal formative ideological undercurrents. That Mencken often views American faith through the false monolith of Puritanism speaks to the success of the First Great Awakening in bridging New England’s “elder-Puritanism” to nondenominational “neo-Puritanism.” As a sociological

²² Ibid, 238.

²³ Ibid, 241-42.

text, "Puritanism as a Literary Force" says more than it ever could as a historical text. By 1917, Puritanism was still such a dominant social power that it assumed responsibility for phenomena that were barely tied to its former reign.

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