

Lesson Three Worksheet: The Power of the Majority over Thought

Student Name _____ Date _____

“Of the Power Exercised by the Majority in America over Thought”

[The section is taken from Volume I, Part II, Chapter 7, of *Democracy in America*, [“Of the Tyranny of the Majority.”](#) Read the following passages and answer the questions at the end of each selection. Note that important academic vocabulary has been bolded in the passage and listed at the end of this worksheet. You should try to figure out the meaning of the words from the context and consult a good online dictionary such as Webster where necessary. Be sure to write down your definitions on this sheet. This will help you understand the argument.]

[Contrast of European and American Society]

When you come to examine how thought is exercised in the United States, you notice very clearly to what extent the power of the majority surpasses all the powers that we know in Europe.

Thought is an invisible and almost **imperceptible** power that laughs at all tyrannies. Today, the most absolute sovereigns of Europe cannot prevent certain ideas hostile to their authority from circulating silently within their States and even within their **courts**. It is not the same in America; as long as the majority is uncertain, people speak; but as soon as the majority has **irrevocably** decided, everyone is silent, and friends as well as enemies then seem to climb on board together. The reason for this is simple. There is no monarch so absolute that he can gather in his hands all of society’s forces and **vanquish** opposition in the way that a majority vested with the right to make and execute laws can.

A king, moreover, has only a physical power that acts on deeds and cannot reach wills; but the majority is vested with a strength **simultaneously** physical and moral, which acts on the will as well as on actions and which at the same time prevents the deed and the desire to do it.

I know of no country where, in general, there reigns less independence of mind and true freedom of discussion than in America.

There is no religious or political theory that may not be freely preached in the constitutional States of Europe and that does not penetrate into the others and I do not know of a European people so powerful and so strong that it is not forced from time to time to hear hard truths. It is not this way in America; for there is no country in Europe so subject to a single power that someone who wants to speak the truth does not find some support capable of insuring him against the results of his independence. If he has the misfortune to live under an absolute government, he often has the people for him; if he lives in a free country, he can find shelter, as needed, behind royal authority. The aristocratic part of society sustains him in democratic countries, and democracy in the others. But within a democracy organized as that of the United States, only a single power is found, a single element of strength and success, and nothing outside of it.

Tocqueville: Lesson Three. The Power of the Majority over Thought

Text-Dependent Question	Evidence-Based Answer
Why is the power of the majority over thought so much more absolute in democratic America than in the monarchies of Europe?	
What does Tocqueville mean by the physical and moral power of the majority?	
What is lacking in American society that is found in Europe that allows for more freedom of thought there?	

[How Freedom of Thought is Limited]

In America, the majority draws a **formidable** circle around thought. Within these limits, the writer is free; but woe to him if he dares to go beyond them. It isn't that he has to fear an **auto-da-fé**, but he is exposed to all types of distasteful things and to everyday persecutions. A political career is closed to him; he has offended the only power that has the ability to open it to him. Everything is denied him, even glory. Before publishing his opinions, he believed he had some partisans; it seems to him that he has them no longer, now that he has revealed himself to all; for those who censure him speak openly, and those who think as he does, without having his courage, keep quiet and distance themselves. He gives in; finally, under the daily effort, he yields and returns to silence, as though he felt remorse for having told the truth.

Chains and executioners, those are the crude instruments formerly used by tyranny; but today civilization has perfected even despotism itself, which seemed however to have nothing more to learn.

Princes had, so to speak, materialized violence; the democratic republics of today have made violence as entirely intellectual as the human will that it wants to constrain. Under the absolute government of one man, despotism, to reach the soul, crudely struck the body; and the soul, escaping from these blows, rose gloriously above it; but in democratic republics, tyranny does not proceed in this way; it leaves the body alone and goes right to the soul. The master no longer says: You will think like me or die; he says: You are free not to think as I do; your life, your goods, everything remains with you; but from this day on you are a stranger among us. You will keep your privileges as a citizen, but they will become useless to

Tocqueville: Lesson Three. The Power of the Majority over Thought

you. If you aspire to be the choice of your fellow citizens, they will not choose you, and if you ask only for their esteem, they will still pretend to refuse it to you. You will remain among men, but you will lose your rights to humanity. When you approach your fellows, they will flee from you like an impure being. And those who believe in your innocence, even they will [419] abandon you, for people would flee from them in turn. Go in peace; I spare your life, but I leave you a life worse than death.

Absolute monarchies had dishonored despotism. Let us be careful that democratic republics do not rehabilitate it, and that, while making despotism heavier for some, they do not, in the eyes of the greatest number, remove its odious aspect and its degrading character.

Text-Dependent Question	Evidence-Based Answer
What does Tocqueville mean by the “formidable circle around thought”?	
How do authors gradually realize that they are not going to change the mind of the public?	
How does the majority treat those outside this circle of thought?	

[Literary Genius and Freedom of Mind]

Among the proudest nations of the Old World, books have been published that intended faithfully to portray the vices and absurdities of their contemporaries...Molière criticized the court in the plays that he had performed before the courtiers. But the dominating power in the United States does not understand being played in this way. The slightest reproach wounds it; the smallest biting truth shocks it, and everything from the forms of its language to its most solid virtues must be praised. No writer, no matter how famous, can escape this obligation to heap praise upon his fellow citizens. So the majority lives in perpetual **self-adoration**; only foreigners or experience can bring certain truths to the ears of Americans.

If America has not yet had great writers, we do not have to look elsewhere for the reasons: literary genius does not exist without freedom of the mind, and there is no freedom of the mind in America.

Tocqueville: Lesson Three. The Power of the Majority over Thought

The **Inquisition** was never able to prevent the circulation in Spain of books opposed to the religion of the greatest number. The dominion of the majority does better in the United States: it has removed even the thought of publishing such books. Unbelievers are found in America, but unbelief finds, so to speak, no organ there.

You see governments that strive to protect morals by condemning the authors of licentious books. In the United States, no one is condemned for this kind of work; but no one is tempted to write them. It is not that all citizens have pure morals, but the majority is steady in its morals.

Here, the use of power is undoubtedly good. I am, consequently, speaking only about the power itself. This irresistible power is an unremitting fact, and its good usage is only an accident.

Text-Dependent Question	Evidence-Based Answer
What role did literature play in European monarchies?	
What seems to be the reason Americans don't like criticism? Why does Tocqueville think he will be successful with his criticism?	
Why does Tocqueville think in 1835 that there are no great writers in America?	

Academic Vocabulary

Definition

Imperceptible

Courts

Irrevocably

Vanquish

Simultaneously

Formidable

Auto-da-fé,

Partisans

Remorse

Self-adoration

Inquisition