

The Man Called Houdini

Lesson Plan

Themes: Psychology, immigration, economics, sociology

Materials: *Houdini* from PBS' "The American Experience" VHS videocassette (probably available at your local public library)

Before Viewing Question and Discussion

1. Houdini was born Ehrich Weiss in Budapest, Hungary, and died as Harry Houdini, a "native of Appleton, Wisconsin" (according to his then-current passport). Discuss identity issues of immigrants in America: Why might an immigrant want to change his or her identity? What does a person lose or gain by leaving his or her past behind? Who is welcomed into American society? Who prospers and why? What qualities do students believe make someone an "American?"
2. George Bernard Shaw once said that the three most famous names in history were Jesus Christ, Sherlock Holmes, and Houdini. Talk about celebrity with students: Why might someone seek it out? Include in your discussion such influences as family roles, early successes and failures, legacy and expectations of parents, self-esteem and self-confidence (both positive and negative), talent, and financial concerns. What do students consider the pluses and minuses of such a life? Talk about such issues as privacy, personal fulfillment and rewards, public rewards, and financial rewards.
 - a. How are celebrities made? Ask students to discuss the venues through which they get information about celebrities. Talk about various ways "buzz" is generated, and why. What's most important—talent or marketing? Which does the public see most often? How does marketing of celebrities vary in newspapers, TV, and in person? How genuine are the people students see on TV? How might such marketing benefit and/or harm the public?

After Viewing Question and Discussion

1. Discuss Houdini's personality in relation to his fame. Why might a person like Houdini seek out fame? What was his relationship with his parents like? What was his life like as a child? How did fame change his life? Did fame bring Houdini happiness? Was his career satisfying? Was his personal life satisfying?
2. Ask students to evaluate Houdini's rapport with the public. How did he market himself? How did others market him? How real were his talents? How is he different than TV or movie stars today? How is he similar?

Activities for Students

1. Houdini was emblematic of the 1920s. His act increased in daring throughout his career; he reached the height of risk-taking in the '20s, mirroring much of American society's behavior at large. Introduce the Roaring '20s with Houdini's act. Then ask students to research photographs and stories about other risky activities from this era, such as airplane wing-walking, wild stock market speculation, and inflated Florida land development. Discuss the boom war economy as context, as well as where such risky actions might lead. Also consider the similarities and differences between the '20s and the year 2001, with its record-breaking stock market and real estate price increases, the wild speculation in the technology markets, and the growth of extreme sports.
2. An historian in the film notes of Houdini, "He confronted our deepest fears." Ask students what they think this means. Introduce the concept of voyeurism: Why might people want to see an act such as Houdini's? How did it make students feel? Who might benefit and who might be harmed by such actions? Are there people such as Houdini today? Ask students for examples, and discuss the social and psychological context surrounding such people and events.
3. Houdini was a consummate showman, using timing and suspense as devices to heighten the drama of his escapes. Ask students to debunk or explain Houdini's tricks, and show how he turned his actions into theater. Divide the class into several groups, and give them each an escape to research: ropes, handcuffs, straitjackets, milk can, among others. Have each group explain how Houdini escaped, and discuss his timing, suspense, and showmanship. Ask them to compare Houdini's methods with those used in entertainment today.*



* some material borrowed from PBS "The American Experience" website.