

ADRIEN BRODY HOUDINI

"My brain is the key that sets me free." - Harry Houdini

CLASSROOM GUIDE

Vocabulary

Using a [dictionary](#) or an encyclopedia, students may want to define or explain the significance of the following terms from this program. Students can also keep their own list of terms to define as they watch.

Shtick	Spiritualist
Illusion	Psychic
Vaudeville	Ethereal
Sorcerer	Mortality
Metamorphosis	Charlatan
Clandestine	Nefarious

INTRODUCTION

HOUDINI, a two-night scripted miniseries on HISTORY®, follows the epic story of Harry Houdini, one of America's first world-renowned superstars. From humble beginnings at circus sideshows and in small vaudeville acts, Hungarian immigrant Ehrich Weiss rose to become a household name across the globe. Academy Award® winner Adrien Brody (*The Pianist*) stars as The Great Harry Houdini.

The film follows Houdini as he finds fame as a magician and showman and encounters some of the greatest names of the era, from U.S. presidents to Arthur Conan Doyle. A thrilling ride throughout Harry's psyche, **HOUDINI** explores his stunts, his visions and his mastery of illusion. Students will learn about one of the most important showmen of the 20th century and can reflect on his contributions to entertainment, performance and magic.

CURRICULUM LINKS

HOUDINI would be useful for History, Social Studies, Drama and Performance courses. It is appropriate for mature high school students, college students and adult audiences. Due to sensitive content we do not recommend this program for students under the age of 16.

Identification Terms

Students can look up the following people who appear in or are referenced in the film and describe their significance to gain additional insights into Houdini's era.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle	Tsar Nicholas II
President Woodrow Wilson	Kaiser Wilhelm II
Rasputin	Charlie Chaplin



Note: Throughout this guide, words that look like this are hyperlinks.

BACKGROUND: WHO WAS HARRY HOUDINI?

Born to a Jewish family in Hungary in 1874, Ehrich Weiss and his family moved to the United States in 1878 and settled in Wisconsin. Houdini left home at a young age, eventually making his way to New York City. His career began with dime museums, sideshows and circuses, where he worked as an amateur performer along with his older brother. He soon changed his name to Harry Houdini in honor of the French magician Robert Houdin. After he married a young Catholic girl and fellow performer named Bess Rahner in 1894, Houdini was about to give up performing for a more reliable job when he got his first big break.

Spectators were dazzled by Houdini's extreme escapism and theatrical style. He FREED himself from handcuffs, suspended straightjackets, water-filled milk cans and confined spaces in performances that emphasized his daring persona. In a few short years, Houdini's fame had spread across the globe. Always on the cutting edge, he became involved in the latest technological innovations such as motion pictures and aviation. He served as president of the Society of American Magicians for several years and devoted himself to debunking fraudulent spiritualists and psychics. Houdini died on Halloween Day in 1926, but his legend lives on.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Students can answer these questions in a group or classroom setting, or they can choose to answer one or more of these questions in essay format.

1. How would you describe Houdini's upbringing and early life? How do you think these experiences shaped him and made him more determined to succeed?
2. At one point Houdini says "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger." Do you agree with this idea? Discuss.
3. How do you think Houdini's relationship with his mother affected him?
4. Where did the name "Harry Houdini" come from? What other people have changed their names for the purpose of show business?
5. In this film, we learn that Houdini may have been involved in espionage. Why do you think he would have been willing to collect and share information with the British authorities?
6. Why do you think Houdini had such appeal internationally? Do you think his appeal as a performer was universal? Discuss.
7. Houdini performed many kinds of stunts, but they all had certain characteristics in common. What were these characteristics? Why do you think people were so mesmerized by his stunts?
8. A central theme of this film is the concept of escape. What did Houdini believe his audiences were trying to escape from when they came to see him perform? What was Houdini trying to escape from, and was he successful?
9. Houdini spent a lot of time and energy trying to discredit psychics he thought were frauds. Why do you think this issue was so important to him?
10. Houdini says in the film "never let them know what's really going on inside." Why do you think this was an important philosophy for him?
11. What adjectives would you use to describe Houdini? Why do you think he is still considered one of the world's most important performers almost a century after his death?
12. Can you think of a performer, politician or athlete today that inspires people in the same way Houdini did?



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PRIMARY SOURCE ACTIVITIES

Primary source documents give students an excellent way to explore the life of Houdini. He left behind a rich collection of writings, show posters, photographs and other personal documents that give us insight into his life and historical context. Below are a set of activities designed to help students examine Houdini's life through a sampling of sources.

1. THE YOUNG EHRLICH

As a boy Ehrich Weiss, later known as Houdini, left home to try to find work. View this letter at the Library of Congress website: Postcard from [Ehrich Weiss to his mother](#). What does Houdini say? What is significant about the way he signed his letter? Students can analyze this letter to gain insights into his early years.

2. I DARE YOU

During his early years performing at dime museums, Houdini would distribute "handbills" to attract audiences. View one of these handbills at the Library of Congress website: [Harry Houdini, the expert handcuff manipulator](#). After reading the handbill, discuss the purpose of this form of advertisement. Why do you think Houdini would have handed these out? How do you think people would have reacted when they received one of these announcements?

3. DARING DIVE POSTER

Houdini often publicized his stunts in newspapers and on posters. View one of these posters at the Library of Congress website: [Daring dive poster](#). How does the poster "sell" Houdini's stunt? What kind of language is used to draw audiences to see the stunt? Discuss or write a short essay answering these questions.

4. SELECTIVE SERVICE

The Selective Service Act of 1917 required that all men of a certain age register in the event of a military draft. This was during World War I when the need for troops increased. You can view Houdini's draft card at the National Archives website: [World War I Draft Registration Card for Harry Handcuff Houdini](#)

Discussion questions: What is notable about Houdini's draft card? Do you think it was fair that all men of a certain age were required to register for the draft?

5. THE GREAT MILK CAN ESCAPE

View a photograph of Houdini preparing for a stunt in which he promised to escape from a sealed milk can at the Library of Congress website: [Harry Houdini performs the great milk can escape](#)

Use the photo analysis worksheet located at [Teacher's Guides and Analysis Tool](#) to analyze this photograph and discuss what it reveals about Houdini's craft.

(Find additional primary sources related to Houdini at [Houdini: A Biographical Chronology](#) and ask students to choose one to analyze.)

PRIMARY SOURCE PASSAGE

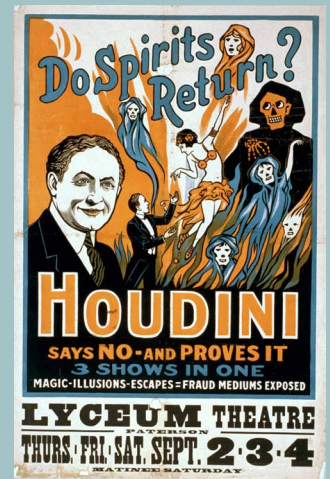
Houdini became a well-known skeptic of Spiritualists, including a famous medium or psychic known as “Margery.” In the passage below, Houdini describes some of the reasons he was doubtful of practitioners such as Margery, who vowed that they could communicate with those who had passed away.

“It has been stated in print by a staunch believer in Spiritualism that I possess psychic power, but were I to accept that statement as being true, I should be pluming myself with false feathers.

The belief in Spiritualism is getting to be a very serious thing, and it is high time that the truth should be established beyond peradventure of doubt by undeniable evidence ...

I am not an irretrievable skeptic. I am not hopelessly prejudiced. I am perfectly willing to believe, and my mind is wide open; but I have, as yet, to be convinced. I am perfectly willing, but the evidence must be sane and conclusive.”

-Excerpt from Houdini on Magic, edited by Walter B. Gibson and Morris N. Young. Dover Publications, 1953.



COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think Houdini means when he says he is not “an irretrievable skeptic”? Does this mean he might believe in Spiritualism?
2. What do you think the phrase “the evidence must be sane and conclusive” means? What kinds of evidence do you think Houdini might be looking for to prove that psychics are really communicating with the dead?



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ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

1. Inspired by Houdini’s posters, ask students to create a vaudeville show. They can design the posters to appeal to a wide audience, using colorful illustrations to encourage people to attend. Finally, they can display their posters in the hallways or on classroom boards to create a museum of authentic vaudeville advertisements.
2. Magicians have played important roles in communities throughout history. Ask students to research the history of magic and find another magician they think is interesting. Then, have students write essays about this magician, some of their key tricks or approaches to magic and their importance within their social context. Students can share these projects with the larger class or group in short oral or visual presentations. Students can also research and write about the Society of American Magicians.
3. After watching this film, students can reflect on what they learned and then pursue additional research online or at the library about magic tricks. Then, ask them to create or learn to perform a trick of their own. When practicing these tricks, ask students to consider Houdini’s emphasis on performance and theatrics to sell their illusion. Finally, ask them to perform a magic show for their classmates and compete against each other for the most effective, creative and surprising tricks!
4. Ask students to imagine they are a budding journalist reporting in the time of Houdini. Have them write an article describing one of his most famous feats (i.e. escapes from handcuffs, straightjackets, milk cans, etc). Or students can write an obituary of Houdini’s life, consulting actual obituaries for reference. (Visit [Houdini obituaries](#) for examples of his actual obituary.)
5. Houdini was involved in many innovative fields. Research his roles in aviation and early film and write a short paper about one of these aspects of his career.



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STEM EXTENSIONS

Below are some ideas for connecting Houdini to STEM-related activities and courses. Teachers can adapt these activities to meet the age and proficiency level of their students or can expand these activities into longer-term projects.

- In 1908, Houdini unveiled a trick using a heavy iron milk can. He climbed inside and had audience members fill the can with water before locking the can, leaving Houdini to escape. Do you think the can could hold the same amount of water with Houdini inside as it would without him? What can you explain about the concept of displacement? Explore the concepts of volume, mass and density.
- A number of Houdini's tricks involved escaping from handcuffs or opening pad locks without a key. Research how a key and a lock work – what are the grooves used for on a standard house key? What are master keys?
- In 1905, Houdini made a shift from being a magician to being an escape artist in more stunts outside of the typical theatre stage. In 1907, he jumped into the frigid waters off the Weighlock bridge in Rochester, New York. Research what happens to your body in cold water. Do your muscles work as quickly? What happens to the rate of your breath? Define hypothermia.
- Harry Houdini accomplished death-defying escapes, but he also had a weakness—he suffered from sea sickness on every sea voyage. What is sea or motion sickness? How does it relate to your inner ear?
- Houdini once made an elephant disappear! Or did he? What is an illusion? Can your eyes really play tricks on you? How do optical illusions work? And how does it relate to the blind spot in your eyes? Write an essay about optical illusions and how they work.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

WEBSITES

History.com/shows/houdini

Radio broadcasts on Houdini's legacy:

[*The Life and Death of Harry Houdini*](#)

Primary sources from the Library of Congress:

[*Harry Houdini Collection*](#)

BOOKS

Fleischman, Sid. Escape! The Story of the Great Houdini. (Greenwillow Books, 2008).

Houdini on Magic. Houdini, Harry. Edited by Walter B. Gibson and Morris N. Young (Dover Publications, 1953).

The Secret Life of Houdini: The Making of America's First Superhero. Kalush, William and Larry Sloman. (Atria, 2007)