

Harry houdini essay



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Sarah Busi Ms. Roach Honors American Literature 12 March 2013 Harry Houdini: World's Greatest Magician " Remembered for his ability to escape from bonds and containers, Houdini is the world's most famous magician, and his name is instantly recognized, although he died over 70 years ago" (" Harry 1"). Harry Houdini was much more than any ordinary magician a mother might hire for their child's birthday party. When one thinks of Harry Houdini, the furthest thing from their mind would be the cliched pulling a rabbit out of a hat or amateur card tricks.

Houdini forced his audience to question reality with his outstanding and incomprehensible ability to make the impossible possible. During the 1920s, crime, gangster activity, and racial discrimination were at their peak, but Harry Houdini was able to offset some of those harsh realities by entertaining and fascinating people using the mystery and illusion of his magic tricks. Harry Houdini's early life influenced and sparked his interest in entertainment and magic.

The Weiss family, consisting of Mayer Samuel, Cecilia Steiner Weiss, and their five children, were originally from Budapest, Hungary and later immigrated to Appleton, Wisconsin (Higbee). Harry Houdini was born on March 24, 1874 (" Harry 2"). Harry Houdini's father, a rabbi named Mayer Samuel, did not necessarily agree with his son's interest in magic, but when Harry was sixteen, his father passed away, and he felt free to pursue his passion as a career. Harry's brother, Theodore Hardeen, born Ferencz Deszo Weiss, helped him to kick-start his career by becoming his magic assistant.

The duo became known as the “ Houdini Brothers” (Higbee). Houdini later met Wilhelmina Beatrice “ Bess” Rahner, and two weeks later, he made her his wife. Bess was also in the entertainment business as a struggling singer, so she decided to help her husband with his magic career. Although she replaced Theodore, Bess made a great magic assistant because she could sing, dance, and she was light weight (“ Harry 1”). To most, magic is just a hobby, but instead, Harry Houdini decided to pursue his passion and was very ambitious to become the best in his craft. Houdini’s first exposure to magic was when his father took him to see Dr.

Lynn, a touring magician, who used butcher knives to cut off the limbs and head of a victim in a cabinet. Harry Houdini was thereafter infatuated with magic. “ At the age of 12, Houdini ran away from home to find a job and help support his family. When he returned, he greeted his mother with, “ Shake me, I’m magic. ” As his mother shook him, coins flew from his body; this was Houdini’s first magic trick. ” The young, aspiring magician educated himself primarily with books. Revelations of Spirit Medium by A. Medium exposed the tricks of fake psychics, and The Memoirs of Robert-Houdin was the autobiography of Houdini’s mentor and inspiration. At the age of seventeen, Erich Weiss changed his name to Harry Houdini after Harry Kellar, American magician, and Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin, from whom Houdini took his surname and added the letter ‘ i’. Houdini had written, “ From the moment I began to study the art, he became my guide and hero. I asked nothing more of life than to become in my profession like Robert-Houdin” (“ Harry 1”). Harry Houdini’s thirty-five year magic career was very successful and his

well-known, outrageous stunts made him the legendary magician we know him as today.

One of Houdini's first performances got him the name the " King of Cards. " He was obviously a talented magician but he performed simple tricks that got mediocre reviews (" Harry 1"). For about seven years, Houdini worked small shows and labored in obscurity. He was on the brink of reevaluating his career when he was given his big break on vaudeville by theater master, Martin Beck. Beck became Houdini's manager and helped the young magician get nationwide notoriety. This was a huge leap from the twenty-five dollar a week Harry had been previously making. This was a huge turning point for his career (" Harry 4"). Harry joined the Society of American Magicians (S. A. M.) in 1904, an organization established in 1902 by professional and amateur conjurers who shared a common interest in publicizing mystery attractions and sharing their tricks at monthly meetings. " Houdini resigned two weeks later because of disagreements regarding his magazine. Harry Houdini and S. A. M. eventually reconciled their differences and Harry not only rejoined the group, but was readmitted as an honorary member in 1912 and was later even elected president, which was a huge honor to Houdini (" Harry 1").

He sailed to England in the summer of 1900 where he began his first international tour. Upon returning to the United States in 1905, he was feeling pressure to become bigger and better. Houdini toured for the next ten years, constantly finding ways to stay in the public eye and push his abilities to their limits (" Harry 4"). But Harry was smart. He knew that his vaudeville tours would not last forever so he started finding alternative ways

to further his career. He began appearing in silent films such as Master Mystery and Grime Game.

This also sparked his idea to found the Houdini Picture Corporation in 1921. The production company debuted its first film the Man From Beyond (" Harry 5"). Another venture that Harry Houdini was particularly proud of was the Conjurer's Monthly Magazine (" Harry 3"). Harry Houdini is known for his death-defying stunts and escapes and his ability to entertain and shock his audience which is why he is considered to be one of the forefathers of magic and illusions. Houdini had two fundamental types of tricks: illusions and escapes.

For example, early on in his career, Harry realized that most handcuffs open with the same key. He then took this premise and began to encourage the members of his audience to bring their own handcuffs to lock him into for a sense of believability. This became known as his " Challenge Handcuff Act". But later on in his career, his escapes became more and more outrageous. On January 7, 1906, Harry Houdini established himself as a professional magician by escaping from the jail cell of President Garfield's assassin, Charles Guiteau, in Washington DC.

Houdini was stripped down, searched, and locked up in the cell. Not only did he escape from the cell, he also retrieved his clothes that were locked in a different cell, redressed, and switched eight other prisoners to different cells, all in 21 minutes. This stunt was coined, the " Naked Prison Test Escape". Harry Houdini then decided to take his escape skills to the next level by challenging himself to get out of a straitjacket. Sure enough, the master

escape artist was able to do it, but how? There are theories that Harry had to dislocate his shoulder in order to get slack.

Or perhaps another, and more likely theory, is that Harry expanded his chest and strained against the body straps. While those are just examples of Houdini's most famous escapes, he is also known for being an illusionist as well. One of Harry's most famous illusions was the " Vanishing Elephant" which became such a hit, that Houdini continued to perform it on his tour for nineteen weeks. It first debuted on January 7, 1918 when Houdini's 10, 000 pound elephant, Jenni, walked into an empty cabinet with a door on the back and a curtain in front. Two seconds later, Jenni had disappeared. Needless to say, Houdini left the audience dumbfounded.

Unfortunately, however, during Houdini's tour on October 22, 1926, students from McGill University asked if Houdini could withstand a blow to the stomach. Before Harry had any time to brace himself for the hit, J. Gordon punched the famous magician three times causing his appendix to rupture. Harry survived but not for much longer. A few weeks later he fell ill from streptococcus peritonitis (an inflammation of the abdominal cavity) and died on October 31, 1926. Harry Houdini's mysterious illusions and risky escapes caught the attention of people all over the world, and he continued to entertain them for the early part of the 1920s.

As the forefather of magic, Harry Houdini set the stage for future, aspiring magicians to try to go above and beyond his already extreme tricks. There have been comparable stunts from magicians, such as Chris Angel and David Blane more recently, but Harry was the first to make the impossible possible.

For that he will forever be known as the greatest magician of not only the 1920s, but the greatest magician of all time. Works Cited " Harry 1 Houdini. " American Decades. Ed. Judith S. Baughman, et al. Detroit: Gale, 1998. Biography In Context. Web. 21 Feb. 2013. " Harry 2 Houdini. Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology. Detroit: Gale, 2001. Biography In Context. Web. 21 Feb. 2013. " Harry 3 Houdini's Magic. " American Decades Primary Sources. Ed. Cynthia Rose. Vol. 1: 1900-1909. Detroit: Gale, 2004. 33-37. Biography In Context. Web. 21 Feb. 2013. " Harry 4 Houdini. " St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture. Ed. Sara Pendergast and Tom Pendergast. Detroit: St. James Press, 2000. Biography In Context. Web. 21 Feb. 2013. Higbee, Joan F. " Houdini: A Biographical Chronology. " Houdini: A Biographical Chronology. Oct. 1996: n. p. SIRS Government Reporter. Web. 22 Feb 2013.