



# *THE SPIRITUALIST*

## Readers' Guide

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### Discussion Questions:

1. The opening quotes by Oscar Wilde and Emily Dickinson speak to the issue of truth—Wilde says it's not pure or simple, and Dickinson notes that one must "tell all the truth, but tell it slant, lest every man be blind." What do you think the authors mean by those words? How do they apply to *The Spiritualist*?
2. Do you think that Evelyn was truly speaking to spirits? If so, why? If not, why not?
3. Michel Jourdain is spoken of often as being a charlatan and a manipulator. Do you believe he manipulated Evelyn? How so?
4. To Evelyn, Benjamin Rampling says, "Oh the ways we delude ourselves!" In what ways do the characters in the book delude themselves?
5. Evelyn tells Michel that she was taught that immorality and sin were indications of a weak will. Do you believe that is true? Why or why not? How do the characters in the book either support or contradict her statement?
6. When Michel tells Evelyn that women's intellect is God given, and therefore meant to be developed, he is contradicting common 19th century thought, which believed that women were ruled by their reproductive systems, and therefore any creative or intellectual pursuit might result in illness, deformity or degenerate offspring. Do you think this statement influenced Evelyn to make the decisions she makes? Why or why not? Do you believe this prejudice against women's intellectualism exists in the world today?
7. Characters in the book refer often to the idea of the seen/unseen world. Evelyn says that to make one's peace with partial truths is the only possibility for happiness, because we are not meant to understand the whole. Michel says to not understand the whole is to not understand the truth. The believers in the spirit circle believe that instinct and intuition are as valid—perhaps even more valid—than empirical experience. How does Evelyn come to terms with these philosophies? Which of them do you believe is most true?

8. How do Evelyn's beliefs and upbringing contribute to her partnership with Michel? Michel says to her, "I'd feel sorry for you, chère, if your situation weren't so much your own doing. All that ambition and faculty, and no idea what to do." Do you agree with him? Disagree? In what ways do you feel that Evelyn is the architect of her own situation?
9. Do you think Ben truly felt sympathy and affection for Evelyn? Or was he simply manipulating her? Why or why not?
10. Michel says that calling something lunacy is a only a way to explain the things we don't understand. How is that still true today? What else might be a "fact of nature not yet discovered." Science played a big part in defining cultural beliefs in the 19th century. Do you think it does so today? In what ways?
11. Do you feel Michel is right when he speaks of immorality being an artificial construct used by society to control its members? Do you feel he was immoral in his relationship with Adele? With Dorothy? With Evelyn? In what ways were the other characters in the book immoral? Are there degrees of immorality? If so, how did Evelyn and Dorothy's immorality measure up to Michel's? How did Benjamin's? Peter's? Adele's? The Atherton family?
12. Do you feel Dorothy was an equal in her relationship with Michel? With Evelyn? In what ways was she as much a manipulator as Michel was? In what ways was Evelyn?
13. The willingness to believe, and people's blindness to their own natures, play a big part in the denouement of the story. Do you think this willingness to believe is an asset or a flaw in human nature? Why or why not?
14. In the 19th century, sodomy was often punishable by law. The idea of homosexuality as something other than a degenerate and immoral sexual urge was unknown. Had Peter been exposed, he would have been destroyed socially. Given this, do you believe Peter Atherton was justified in his actions? Michel tells Evelyn that Peter resented her and even hated her, and that his will was meant to cause her trouble as a form of punishment. Do you believe you believe were Peter's motivations in leaving such a will, and how do you think he truly felt about Evelyn?
15. What do you think of the ending? Do you think Evelyn made the right decision in casting her lot with Michel? Do you think they have a future together? What kind of future do you think it will be?

## **Author Interview:**

*Why did you write The Spiritualist?*

One cannot do research on the 19th Century without coming across the mention of séances or Spiritualism, and I'd read many references to those things while researching other projects. It had always intrigued me, and as I read deeper into the subject, I discovered that Spiritualism was not just a fashionable entertainment, though there certainly was that aspect to it. It was also a deeply layered philosophy that embraced women's rights and equality, marriages between those of like minds—soul connections, rather than financial or social ones—and issues such as women's health, birth control and dress reform. It was a philosophy that spoke profoundly to women, who had few rights or property of their own, and virtually no say in their own lives. Spiritualism not only embraced women as its main representatives and speakers, it gave women a power and a voice that was non-threatening to the status quo—in her passive and non-direct state as a channel for spirits to speak through, a woman was free to speak her mind. Spiritualism had female leaders as well as male ones, and the movement expected and respected great power in women. As such, it was hugely popular among women—many women's rights leaders were Spiritualists. Not only was Spiritualism a precursor to the New Age philosophies of today, it played a crucial role in women's history. The more I read, the more I wanted to pursue this idea: what would happen if a powerless woman buffeted by fate and society found in spiritualism a way to gain power over those who would oppress her? And what would happen if pursuing that revealed hidden and not entirely welcome aspects of herself? That was the seed of *The Spiritualist*.

*You say that Spiritualism was the precursor to many present-day philosophies. How so?*

Spiritualism as a philosophy had its inception in science. At this time, science had great influence in cultural thought, and, many believed it even made religion irrelevant. Science discovered new things every day. What had been thought of as “miracles” before was proved through empirical evidence to be simply facts of nature. The age of the earth, for example, which had been based on biblical teachings, was proved to be many thousands of years older than religious interpretations had it. So religion was taking a hit. While people had grown tired of Calvinism and evangelism, they were still looking for some sort of spirituality, and some way to deal with grief, especially after the Civil War. Spiritualism was a philosophy that managed to blend the need for belief with the empiricism of science, and it did so in a liberal theology that accommodated all kinds of belief systems and almost any paradox. It was a unifying philosophy that not only connected people, but also made them feel they had some power in influencing it. Anyone had the capacity to speak to spirits, and in a philosophy where spirits had the ability to change the known world, it was possible that whoever spoke to them could change the world as well. It also centered the religious experience in the home rather than in the church, which many felt had too much power. Spiritualism was, in fact, a kind of religious revival. It strengthened the already present Universalists, Unitarians and Quakers, and led to new philosophies like Theosophy, Christian Scientist, and New Thought. It was also one of the modern philosophies that espoused the theory that quantum physics espouses today—the idea that the past, present and future are all one, and that different universes (called “spheres” in spiritualism) could exist simultaneously.

*What kind of resources did you consult in researching The Spiritualist?*

The 19th Century is a treasure trove for researchers. It was a time of great change both philosophically and scientifically, and people were not only aware of that change, they were determined to chronicle it. People wrote of their experiences, self-published them, and gave these books to friends and relatives as gifts. There are many journals of women who decided to pursue spiritualism and mediumship, and essays and books written by people such as Arthur Conan Doyle, who was a fervent believer, and Harry Houdini, who was not. In 1857, the Boston Courier offered a reward of \$500 to any medium who could prove the existence of spirit communications, and kept records of the demonstrations (none of which they felt proved the case). The American Society for Psychical Research, which was formed in 1884, did many investigations into psychic phenomena and kept records of those, and mediums such as Emma Hardinge and Daniel Douglas Home wrote books about their experiences. A quick search of "Spiritualism" in either the historical New York Times, or The Making of America site (a joint project between Cornell University and the University of Michigan that has scanned 19th century documents into a searchable database available online) lists many references. In short, there is no dearth of information about the movement. Some of the best general overviews on the subject are *Talking to the Dead* by Barbara Weisberg, which deals with the birth of spiritualism through New York's Fox sisters, and *The Darkened Room* by Alex Owen, which focuses on the female experience of the philosophy.

*The character of Michel Jourdain is clearly a very clever charlatan who understands human nature and reads it very well. What was the inception of the character?*

The character of Michel Jourdain was based on the famous medium Daniel Douglas Home. Like Michel Jourdain, Home was very, very effective, and people swore by his ability. He was also considered to be something of a healer, and was accepted by the aristocracy and royalty of the time and invited into their homes, though rumors of immorality dogged him throughout his career. There were those who said that Home knew the secrets of the upper class, and those secrets protected him from exposure as a fraud. In his 30s, he was adopted by an rich and besotted older woman, and took her name, but was later sued by her for money she had given him under false pretenses—it was a much-talked about case during this time. Like Jourdain, no one was ever able to prove conclusively that Home was a fake, though Houdini went to great trouble to explain how Home might have performed his "miracles," and Robert Browning wrote a scathing poem based on Home called "Mr. Sludge, the Medium." None of this dimmed Home's popularity.

*You seem to be making a statement about the falsity of psychics with the character of Michel Jourdain, but Evelyn Atherton seems to be quite real in her abilities. Do you believe in psychic phenomena yourself?*

I think there are very, very clever people out there along the lines of Michel Jourdain. Reading human behavior is not so very difficult to do; we are all creatures of habit and people fool themselves into believing what they want to believe all the time. I will say that in my researching of 19th Century mediums, I never read the account of one that I didn't feel I could explain. That is not to say I don't believe that people can communicate with spirits—I agree with Michel when he says that some things are facts of nature not yet discovered. Quantum physics and new theories of science are proving every day that we don't know everything about the world we live

in. Shakespeare's words in Hamlet: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." pretty much sums up my own beliefs.