

## Confessions of Madame Psyche

Before you read:

Eighty years ago may seem like a long time. At the time of the fictional autobiography you will read in this lesson, women were still in long dresses and horses had not yet been replaced by cars as the main form of transportation. Still, being a teenager at that time may not have been so different from being a teenager today. Look for similarities and differences as you read this story. In this reading, the main character is an Asian-American teen-ager. Look for the ways in which this fact affects her life.

1. Have you ever had someone read your palm or tell your future?
2. How do people in your family think about fortune telling and tarot cards? What are the reasons for their attitudes.

Reading: Confessions of Madame Psyche  
Memoirs and Letters of Mei-Li Murrow

*In this excerpt, Mei-li is a teen-ager. The book starts in San Francisco with the big earthquake and fire of 1905. Now 1912, Mei-li's half-sister, Erica, has been making a living by getting Mei-li to act as a psychic. Talking to the dead was very popular in the early 1900's. Mei-li doesn't like her work very much, but she doesn't feel she has a choice. At this point, how she and Erica run the show is about to change.*

Unlike a child musician or actress, I was not allowed the company of fellow performers. Even if I had wanted to associate with mediums—few of whom were less than twenty years older than I—it would have been unwise to do so. Mediums were always being accused of collusion in fakery. Most of them met only at annual conventions that we were too poor to attend, even if we had wanted to. Erika would not let me associate with any of the children on the block, certainly not letting any of them into the house where they might poke around and discover some of the alterations we had made. Our neighbors, in any case, had warned their children to stay away from the “little half-breed witch.” (p. 64)

Once or twice Erika and I had physical battles, she slapping me away from her as I screamed, kicked, bit, scratched, and pulled out handfuls of her hair . . . After these battles, I would calm down, contrite, ashamed, and Erika would reason with me. I was an artist, she said, who had to work very hard for a very long time before the reward came. If I stopped now, I would end up scrubbing floors. Being of mixed race, I could not even hope for a job as a shop girl, which was bad enough if I only knew. She was devoting her whole life to developing my career. (p. 65)

*Norman, an African-American journalist visits his old friend Erika and stays in the household for the next two months. He observes the seances and the night before he is to leave, Erika, Mei-li, and Norman have a long talk.*

Erika asks Norman: “. . . You think I’m going about this thing the wrong way? What other way is there?”

“Do you want the truth, Erika?”

Erika leaned her elbows on the table. “Go ahead.”

So we did sit up all night while Norman gave his analysis of our situation.

“First of all, I congratulate you on picking up practically every trick of the trade. That’s the trouble. It’s a standard act, a little of everything, done as well as anyone does it, but just the same old crude tricks.”

“They work,” said Erika.

“Yes, they work, for now, but the public is fickle. First raps and table tipping were enough. Now everyone wants spirit photos. But how long do you think it will be before people catch on to that? No, don’t try to answer. Listen.

. . .

. . . Physical mediumship is dead. Raps and taps and trumpets and, yes, spirit photography too. The sooner you get out of that, the better. There have already been some prosecutions for fraud, because you see, with a photo, you’re selling a product, a tangible thing that can be examined and proven false. Physical mediumship is fifty years out of date. People are still just as gullible, don’t get me wrong, but not that way. It’s too risky, . . .”

“But then what is left?” cried Erika.”

Oh, there's plenty left." . . .

"Well . . . those boots. Speaking of her clothes. You've got her dressed up like a child in mourning, a frumpy, fat child with all that stuff in those pockets. Mei-li is a young lady. Get her into some color—a soft blue, I think. You might consider Chinese pajamas, soft slippers—play up the exotic look. It's the only way, I think, of getting her out of the awful styles you women wear now. Don't buy her those straight, baggy pants the women wear in Chinatown. Have some good silk ones made with a fit that shows a neat, uncorsetted body. You know how the clients will swarm in then, Erika. Yet she'll still be quite respectable—in her ancestral dress."

Erika looked at me, biting her lip thoughtfully. "I've tried to play down her oriental side because of all the bad feeling against the Chinese."

"Well, you can't change those eyes of hers. Besides, in the occult, prejudice works in favor of the oriental, the mysterious East and all that."

. . . .

"And one more thing," said Norman. He paused as if to see if Erika had braced herself for a shock. "You'll have to stop charging admission." Erika looked too flabbergasted to answer. "The medium who charges a dollar a sitting puts herself in a class with vaudeville shows—and movies, which are cheaper and more exciting than jugglers and mediums. But the medium who charges nothing is not an entertainer. She is a lady with a sacred gift."

"How on earth are we to live?" demanded Erika.

"On the rich, of course. As soon as you stop charging money, you become more acceptable to the upper classes, who never pay for anything. When the upper class accepts you, the middle class will follow, and they are more likely to give gifts. . . . (p. 70-71)

The next day Erika drew a picture of trousers and a high-collared, long coat, then told Sophie to make me an outfit like it. Sophie made the first set in muslin, then another and another (her mistakes became comfortable pajamas I wore around the house) until she mastered the design. Then she made the first of the silver-blue silk pajama suits that I wore for the next twenty years.

Erika cancelled my sittings for the rest of the month, telling clients I had accepted an invitation to be examined by the American Society for Psychical Research in Los Angeles. Her hastily invented lie added to my credibility, for the only thing worse than being examined by those suspicious and experienced men and women was being ignored by them.

Then she stripped the seance room. Within a week, all our occult trappings were sold: the table, my boots, costumes, various bits of hardware, the camera and darkroom equipment, even the drapes and rugs. . . . She bought white paint and we repainted the room, put rush mats on the wooden floor, and stood a Japanese screen in front of the window. Sophie made a dozen pillows covered in black silk, which we scattered on the mats. A few straight chairs we left against the wall. One silver-blue pillow, matching my clothes, we placed in front of the screen. "That's your place," said Erika. "Now let's get back to work and see what happens."

Every time I passed a mirror I remembered Norman's words " . . . besides being the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. . . ." and I searched the glass for a sign of that beauty. I saw high cheekbones and my mother's dark almond eyes, a thin nose, a pointed chin, and close-cropped black hair whose waves clung as if sculpted to my head. Was this beauty? I had always believed that my Chinese eyes cancelled any possibility of beauty. But Norman too bore the "blemish" of some features of a non-white race, and he was handsome. Even Erika thought so. Was it, therefore, possible to be both different and beautiful?

*Excerpts from Confessions of Madame Psyche, a novel by Dorothy Bryant, are reprinted by permission of The Feminist Press at The City University of New York. Copyright 1986 by Dorothy Bryant. Originally published by Ata Books in 1986. The Feminist Press released the work, with an afterword by J.J. Wilson, in 1998.*

### After Reading:

1. What was the outfit of the time for a psychic? Is there a uniform for psychics of today?
2. What does it mean to be seen as exotic? Is it a benefit or a drawback, for people today? for Mei Li?
3. Many people of the 1900-1920 were very willing to go to seances and to believe in psychics. What are factors of the times that contributed to this? Think about factors like mortality rate for children, whether there was a war, the level of education for many people and what other kinds of entertainment were available.

### Choose One

1. Draw a a quick sketch of Mei-li as she sees herself. Draw a quick sketch of her as Norman sees her. Don't think, just draw. What are the differences and similarities between the two?
2. Outline Norman's argument. What is his main point? What details does he give to back up his argument? What makes him persuasive?
3. Write a list of 10 things that are true of this time period. Make inferences based on the reading and/or do additional research.



Multiple Choice Practice

1. Mei-li acts out most likely because she feels
  - (1) isolated from others outside her family
  - (2) society treats her and other mixed-race people unfairly
  - (3) used by her sister
  - (4) exhausted and hungry
  - (5) upset that she and Erika are taking advantage of poor people
  
2. Norman tries to convince Erika and Mei-li to change the act because
  - (1) he knows they can make more money if they do something very different
  - (2) he worries that they will get in trouble with the police
  - (3) he is religious and wants to save their souls
  - (4) he thinks the competition is tough and will push them out
  - (5) none of the above
  
3. Mei-li wonders if you can be both different and beautiful. Her question reveals that:
  - (1) The standard idea for beauty of the time did not include people with Asian features.
  - (2) She has never thought of herself as beautiful.
  - (3) She trusts that Norman thinks she is attractive.
  - (4) Up to this point, she has accepted the idea that as a "mixed race" person she couldn't be beautiful
  - (5) all of the above

## Changing Styles: 1884 to 1920

### Writing Activity

Pretend that you are a writer for an ad agency. Your job is to write the copy for advertisements. Choose one of the ads below and write a paragraph that would convince someone to purchase it.

<p><b>1884</b></p> <p>JAEGER'S Sanitary Woollen Ladies' Outer-clothing.</p>  <p>DR. JAEGER'S <b>SANTARY WOOLLEN UNDERCLOTHING</b> FOR LADIES AND CHILDREN</p>	<p><b>1920</b></p>  <p>THERE'S NO QUARREL 'T WIXT TRADITION AND TASTE</p> <p><b>JAEGER</b> The VOGUE in WOOLENS</p>
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## Matching Activity

Below you will find a list of phrases that can be used to describe the two advertisements on the previous page. Study the pictures and use the dictionary to decide which phrases go with each picture. All of the phrases will be used.

1884

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

Deep cuffs and lapels

Upswept hairdo

Sheer hosiery

Fitted bodice

Hour glass shape

Ankle length

Pleated underskirt

Floral trimmed hat

1920

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

Masculine tailoring

Close-fitting cloche

Ornamental closures

Breezy and practical

Abstract pattern

Straight lines

Knee length

Formal and dignified

## The Outfit Amused Us

As far back as I can remember, it was necessary for my father to eke out his small government salary by doing all sorts of odd jobs after his regular hours and his vacations. He belonged to a waiters' association, and frequently he served at dinners, banquets and parties from early evening until dawn. On these occasions, he wore the swallowtailed coat in which he had been married and the black broadcloth trousers which he had picked up at a secondhand shop. This outfit always amused us, for the trousers did not cover his ankles and his big feet spread beneath them in a truly monumental fashion. The coat had a greenish tinge and fitted across his thick shoulders like a harness. My mother had to sew up the shoulder seams after every use. My father cared little about the appearance of his clothes. "So long as they're clean, children," he used to say, when for reasons of pride we used to fidget with his tie, fold down his collars and see to it that he was wearing a proper belt in his trousers. Our attentions amused him, and he would wink at our mother and say, "Girl, they've all got your side's pride."

*from "No Day of Triumph" by J. Saunders Redding (1906-?) in Growing Up Black, ed. Bill Adler, New York: Morrow, 1968.*

### After Reading

#### Multiple Choice Practice

1. What amused the children about the suit?
  - (1) Its greenish tinge
  - (2) The broadcloth
  - (3) The way the father fidgeted with his tie
  - (4) The trousers did not cover his shoes
  - (5) The father's attention to detail

2. Why does the author say that the father's coat fit him "like a harness"?

- (1) To show that it was monumental
- (2) Because the father had been married a long time
- (3) To emphasize that the coat was tight and restrictive
- (4) To make it clear that the father was a waiter
- (5) Because a harness is the style of coat he wore

3. Which of the following actions would the father be LEAST likely to do?

- (1) Drive an out-dated but well maintained car
- (2) Call in sick to attend his child's birthday party
- (3) Wear trousers that had been mended
- (4) Take a part-time job as a train conductor
- (5) Volunteer in a neighborhood clean-up

4. The tone of the passage is

- (1) nostalgic
- (2) bitter
- (3) sad
- (4) joyous
- (5) funny

#### Writing Activity

The father in the passage is willing to sacrifice his leisure time to earn money to support his family. Many people find it necessary to do this at some point in their lives. Think of a sacrifice that you have made. Perhaps you had to give up something in order to be a better child, a better parent, or to reach a personal goal. Write a paragraph describing this sacrifice in detail. How did it feel to have to make a choice? Do you believe that your sacrifice was worth it? Would you make the same choice again?



*Some Women  
don't know this*

Everyone knows that perspiration is one of Nature's ways of eliminating waste matter and of keeping the body at an even temperature.

But many do not realize that this perspiration—given off from the body through two million tiny glands at the average rate of more than a quart a day—is made up of water, salt, and strong acids. These acids quickly develop an unpleasant odor, particularly in some parts of the body—in the pit of the underarm, on the feet, and in other places where the perspiration is closely confined.

Some women do not fully appreciate the importance of safeguarding the dainty toilette against this unpleasant odor of perspiration.

Another annoying thing about perspiration is the destructive action of its strong salts and acids upon articles of wear. Fine silk underwear, silk hosiery, and the uppers and linings of shoes are seriously attacked by the butyric, valerianic and acetic acids of perspiration.

Even though you wash your hosiery and fine silk things at night you do not protect

them against the destructive effects of perspiration while the apparel is being worn.

But there is one complete answer—a simple, easy, effective way of combating not only the unpleasant odor of perspiration but also the harmful acids of perspiration.

“Mum” is the word!

“Mum,” the dainty, snow-white neutralizing cream, instantly and lastingly neutralizes the acids of perspiration, thus robbing them of their power to damage clothing and footwear, and completely preventing all unpleasant odor.

For personal odors a touch of “Mum” to the underarm, the feet, and wherever perspiration and other body odors occur—and you are free from embarrassment the whole day and evening, no matter how active you are, or how much you perspire, or how warm and close the atmosphere of the room.

**“Mum”** *for all body odors*



Irish  
**S**pring  
SPORT

*Deodorant Soap  
with Antibacterial Protection*

## No Sweat

Study the advertisement on this page and on the previous page.

During what years do you think each ad was produced?

1st ad:

2nd ad:

What clues are there?

### Compare and Contrast

Find three similarities between the two ads. What is the same in each ad?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Find three differences between the two ads. What is not the same in each ad?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Look for the descriptive words or phrases in each ad. These might be adjectives or adverbs. List the descriptive words or phrases below.

Ad #1

Ad #2

### Writing Activity

Look at the lists that you have written above. Think about the changing roles of women that you have read about. Think about the purpose of advertising and how ads can change the way we think, even how we think about ourselves. Write an essay comparing and contrasting the two ads. Are they effective for the times in which they were written? Why would an ad for the same product be so different from one era to another? Do the ads affect you in different ways? Be sure to structure your essay with an introduction and a conclusion and to support your ideas with examples and details.

## View of Childhood

These pictures are from the late 1930's.

Choose one picture. Describe the details of the outfits and compare them to what kids would wear today in the same weather. What is the same? What is different?



Before 1950, society's views of childhood changed regularly. At times children were thought to be very much like mini-adults and they were expected to act that way. At times children were viewed as an entirely different species, almost like pets. What view of childhood do you think the clothing in these pictures suggests? Why? Use details from the pictures to support your answers.



