

Discussion Questions for We Hear the Dead

Part One

1. Discuss the concept of gullibility. How was it that people could be so easily fooled by what, in retrospect, seems an obvious fraud?
2. Maggie claimed to have invented the story of a murdered peddler on impulse. What, then, is the significance of the bones and teeth David found in the basement of the Hydesville house?
3. How did the residents of Hydesville contribute to the “snowball effect” of the ghost rapping prank originally conceived by Maggie and Kate?
4. David Fox believed that spirit communication was something similar to the telegraph, a scientific advance that only appeared miraculous. Do you believe that any technological or scientific advance could allow us to communicate with the dead?
5. Part One ends with Maggie “in a panic” over the arrival of her sister Leah. What do we know of Leah Fish at this point in the story? Speculate on why her presence would cause such a reaction.

Part Two

1. When speaking of how easily she and her sister deceived the newspaper editor Horace Greeley, Maggie comments: “What fools were those men of self-importance, who did not credit two half-grown girls with any cleverness!” How did the common view of females in the nineteenth century work in the favor of the Fox Sisters? Were there any times when it worked against them?
2. On more than one occasion, the Fox Sisters were threatened with violence. Why would their claims to spiritual powers provoke some people to violence?
3. How does the historical backdrop of this story (mid-nineteenth century America) contribute to the motivations and actions of the characters?
4. Are there any professions today which bear a similarity to the one the Fox Sisters created for themselves?
5. Compare and contrast the three sisters (Maggie, Kate, and Leah); discuss their personality traits, their motivations, and their perspectives on the clients who come to them for spiritual enlightenment.

Part Three

1. How are Maggie and Elisha engaged in “similar professions?”
2. Discuss the morality of the Fox Sisters’ fraudulent practices. Elisha says, regarding Maggie: “She has long insisted that her spirit messages do good in

the world. I strongly disagree.” Is it possible that good can be accomplished through deception? Or does the means invariably taint the end result?

3. Maggie’s romantic interest in Elisha seems natural. He is an upperclass gentleman with a heroic reputation and a charming manner. But what is it about Maggie that arouses Elisha’s romantic interest, when surely he could have his pick of women?
4. Leah warns Maggie that her romance with Elisha will come to a bad end. Do you believe she has her sister’s best interests at heart, or is it her own interests she has in mind? In your experience, does anyone who has fallen in love ever heed the romantic advice they are given by another?
5. Exploitation is the utilization of another person or group for selfish purposes. Does Leah exploit her sisters for profit? Do Maggie and Kate exploit their clients for fun and amusement? Is Doctor Kane exploiting the mystery of the missing Franklin expedition for fame?

Part Four

1. At times, Maggie has demonstrated a willfulness and independence of spirit. Why then has she been repeatedly led by others (Kate, Leah, and Elisha) into a way of life she would not have chosen for herself?
2. In your opinion, what is the greatest obstacle to happiness for Maggie and Elisha?
3. What, if anything, did Maggie gain from her two years spent in virtual exile from her family?
4. Kate believes that she has a special power. Does Maggie believe in Kate’s power?
5. How were the standards of behavior for women in the mid-nineteenth century different from the standards of behavior for men?

Part Five

1. Discuss the manner in which Kate Fox has grown up. In what ways does she bear a similarity to child stars of the twentieth and twenty-first century?
2. In the final chapter, Maggie asks herself if there was a point where she could have “put her foot down upon some other path” and created a happier future. In your opinion, how could she have avoided her fate? What actions or decisions could have changed the outcome of her life?
3. Discuss the motives and accomplishments of Leah Fox Fish Brown Underhill. She began her life in poverty and ended it in luxury, credited with creating the

entire movement of spiritualism. Was she the only beneficiary of this success, or did she, as she claimed, improve the lot of her sisters along the way?

4. Which of the three Fox Sisters do you think was the most self-absorbed? If the sisters were asked this question, how might each one respond?
5. Elisha Kent Kane sought to expand man's knowledge of the world through his explorations. The Fox Sisters created a profession that gave women a voice in their society and inspired a fascination with the supernatural that outlived them. Which legacy was the greater one?
6. Did the information on the last page of the novel change your perception of the events of the book?