

## Barnum Discussion Questions

1. On Page 11 of his *Life*, Barnum differentiates between “head work,” and “hand work,” for which his contempt is ill-concealed. What does Barnum mean when he refers to “head work,” and how does his mindset about work compare to that of his peers?
2. Barnum lived a very different life than that of his father or grandfather. How does his life represent the rising tide of modernity? Would you categorize him more as being ‘stuck’ in the past, or rather as more forward-thinking?
3. What advancements did Barnum make in the fields of marketing, stage managing, and curiosity-capturing? How did he orchestrate some of his most elaborate and thoughtful schemes? How did he constantly gain the upper-hand over his opposition in show business?
4. How did Barnum respond to his critics, be they literary, professional, moral, etc? How did he always seemingly maintain public approval for his most heinous of humbugs? I.e. how did he ‘save-face’ after his most-scathing reviews?
5. On Page 62 of *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum*, Neil Harris writes about the mutual non-exclusion of “amusement and deceit” on behalf of 19th century American audiences. What is “humbug” according to Barnum? Does Barnum’s definition differ from that of his contemporary critics? What role did Barnum believe practical jokes played in people’s lives, and what kind of social service did he see himself as providing in his capacity as the “prince of humbugs?”
6. How do modern audiences differ from those of the 19th century? How did Barnum capitalize on his understanding of American dispositions toward knowledge and truth? Have any figures since Barnum found comparable success by the same mode of semi-fictional exhibition?
7. What is “capitalist irony” and how did Barnum leverage it to his own advantage? What does his mastery of this phenomenon reveal about his audience?
8. Stephen Mihm explores Barnum’s complicated relationship with racial issues, charting his evolution from a cruel and unscrupulous yankee slave owner to a Republican congressman and champion for black civil rights. What can we learn from this exploration about the ability of the individual to evolve so dramatically inside of their own lifetime? How should society respond to such personal growth?