

THE REVENANT

Discussion Guide



Inspired by true events, *The Revenant* is an epic story of survival and transformation on the American frontier. While on an expedition into the uncharted wilderness, legendary explorer Hugh Glass (Leonardo DiCaprio) is brutally mauled by a bear, then abandoned by members of his own hunting team. Alone and near death, Glass refuses to succumb. Driven by sheer will and his love for his Native American wife and son, he undertakes a 200-mile odyssey through the vast and untamed West on the trail of the man who betrayed him: John Fitzgerald (Tom Hardy). What begins as a relentless quest for revenge becomes a heroic saga against all odds towards home and redemption. *The Revenant* is directed, produced and co-written by Alejandro G. Iñárritu.

The Revenant is not only one of this year's most cinematographically accomplished films, recalling legendary films like John Ford's *The Searchers* and Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, it is also one of the most spiritual. Its narrative revolves around themes of revenge, justice, duty, honor, the establishment of society, and the juxtaposition of humanity's struggle with itself against the backdrop of a brutally beautiful, seemingly eternal nature.

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Humanity's Struggle against
the Backdrop of Eternity



Questions for Discussion

1. Where and how do you see the three types of narratives playing out in the world around you?
2. Like nature in *The Revenant*, who or what judges these conflicts?

Many cinematic narratives fall into one of three types of stories: man vs. man, man vs. nature, and man vs. himself. *The Revenant* has threads of each of these genres in its narrative, and they're all very distinct. Glass struggles against Fitzgerald and the fur traders battle the Native Americans; Glass survives a bear attack and is left to endure the punishing elements and landscape; Glass has to muster all of his spiritual and physical strength to resist the desire to give up and give in.

Iñárritu and cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki depict these external and internal conflicts so that they stand in stark contrast with the beautiful, eternal, indifferent backdrop of nature. Transitions between scenes of horrific human violence and breathtakingly stunning scenery make it seem as if the latter is quietly passing judgment on the former. In the process, the filmmakers seem to draw attention to the absurdity of these temporal struggles—especially those between two finite human beings—when they take place in such a timeless setting.

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Longing for Justice...
Settling for Revenge



Questions for Discussion

1. In what ways do you see the perversion of justice in communities near you and farther away?
2. In extreme cases like Fitzgerald's betrayal of Glass, what does justice look like?

Few characters in film have worked as hard as Glass to get what he wants, with the exception of Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) in *The Searchers*. Glass survives both a Native American raid and a bear attack, digs himself out of a shallow grave, endures freezing cold temperatures and water, falls from a great height, sleeps in a horse carcass, and outlasts Fitzgerald in a battle to the death. He triumphs over all of this in order to obtain justice for what Fitzgerald did to his son and, possibly, by extension, what the white man has done to his wife and her people.

As it does for so many characters in American films, this pursuit of justice quickly morphs into a bloody quest for revenge. From America's cinema to its politics (from the international stage to local communities), the two desires become intertwined...one mistaken for the other. Glass nearly loses his life in this pursuit. More than that, he almost takes Fitzgerald's life until he releases his body into the river.

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Duty, Honor, and Selfishness



Questions for Discussion

1. To whom or what are you bound out of a sense of honor or duty?
2. What does it look like to live selflessly in today's self-centered cultures?

After Glass is brutally attacked by the bear, Capt. Henry (Domhnall Gleeson) asks Fitzgerald and Bridger (Will Poulter) to stay behind and see that he gets a proper burial if/when he passes away. Bridger wants to fulfill their obligation and is willing to face great physical harm in carrying out that duty. Fitzgerald—to save himself—wants to get out while the getting's good.

These two responses, so starkly opposed in these two characters, often represent two sides of the same coin...or person. We know that life often presents us with challenges that demand our best selves, that ask us to put ourselves in harm's—or at least inconvenience's—way for the sake of others. Like Fitzgerald, we fall into a selfish pattern of self-preservation as we look out for ourselves first and foremost. Or, to complicate matters, like Capt. Henry, we might ignore or work against the well-being of others out of a sense of duty or honor.

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Civility and Barbarism



Questions for Discussion

1. We might not use such stark descriptions, but what are the magnetic poles that pull at our society today?
2. In what ways do we ensure that we move in the right direction?

Lh'arritu does not resort to the typical dichotomy that characterizes so many Westerns. He does something more complex, which is closely related to that tension between duty, honor, selfishness, and selflessness and the pursuit of revenge/justice that we discussed above. Most Westerns juxtapose a barbaric Native Americans with cultured, civilized white European communities. In *The Revenant*, Native Americans seem to exist beyond these classifications and outside the white man's squabbles. This tension between civility and barbarism seems to take place *within* the white community instead.

In placing this dichotomy within the white, settling community, it seems as if Lh'arritu is asking what kind of society America was founded upon and, by extension, what type of society we have now and will have moving forward. Is it one that will be civil (hospitable and open) or barbaric (chaotic and inhospitable)? The question seems as relevant now as it was during the time of *The Revenant*.

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A Lust for Things, not Life



It would be difficult to judge American history, both distant and recent, without talking about greed. From the slaughter of the Native Americans to the exploitation of natural resources to the practice of slavery, greed epically, almost cosmically, defines this place. Greed is a motivating factor for Fitzgerald and one that drives the narrative forward. Fitzgerald cares more for pelts than people and resents Glass for making them leave their treasures behind for safe passage back to the settlement.

Questions for Discussion

1. Where do you see greed at work in communities around you? In the world at large?
2. How can we, both individually and communally, overcome our greedy predispositions?

Of all the ills that plague society today, greed might well be the most destructive. It is no respecter of social standing. Unless we are the poorest of the poor, we can give—be it of our money or our time—to others. When we don't, greed wins the day. When we do, the world becomes, incrementally, a better, less violent place.

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Fueled by Family



Questions for Discussion

1. Threats surrounded families during frontier days. Are there any threats that persist to today? What are new threats (or dangers) to families today?
2. Where do you draw the line between your desire and/or ability to protect your family and the recognition that there are so many events out of your control? Are there limits to how far you would go to protect your family?

A central theme in *The Revenant* is the characters' will to survive. While life was harsh for everyone on the frontier, people endured in light of a host of motivating factors. Glass fights to survive--and survives to fight--because he is compelled by a deep love for his family. In this way, *The Revenant* recalls another classic film, Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*, whose central character "rose from the dead" to avenge his family's murder.

Unlike the other men around him, Glass is not motivated by greed or hatred...at first. He is on a quest for revenge throughout much of the film; however, it is fueled by the death of his son, Hawk (and perhaps his wife's as well), who he clearly loved more than himself. Before he is attacked by the bear, nearly everything Glass does is to keep his son safe and alive. It is this same love that brings him back from the dead; and it is this love that he realizes he can neither gain nor lose by killing Fitzgerald.