



# A GHOST STORY

A Discussion Guide

## Introduction

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Writer/director David Lowery's *A Ghost Story* is a hauntingly beautiful meditation on life, loss, grief, and time. Recently deceased, a white-sheeted ghost returns to his suburban home to console his bereft wife, only to find that in his spectral state, he has become unstuck in time, forced to watch passively as the life he knew and the woman he loves slowly slip away. Increasingly unmoored, the ghost embarks on a cosmic journey through memory and history, confronting life's ineffable questions and the enormity of existence.

*A Ghost Story* is one of those rare films that rewards a second viewing. It is a film for thoughtful and spiritual people—those interested in, and holding compassion for, “otherness” in our world. Like any good art, the it suggests important questions without rushing to answers, inspiring conversations around the universal themes of love, loss, grief, life after death, and time. Below are a series of discussion starters for group or individual use.



### Questions for Consideration

1. What is your opinion of or belief in the afterlife? Where do those originate?
2. If you could travel through space in time in life after death, where would you go? Who would you watch? Why?

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### An Uncertain Afterlife

Diverse understandings of the afterlife emerge across cultures, faiths, and time. Because we have no objective proof of life after death—if it exists, where it is, what it is like—we must rely on hope, faith, and imagination. In doing so, we draw inspiration and encouragement from myths and sacred texts—in print or on film—when the fear of death or the grief of loss threaten to undo us.

This uncertainty can also breed creativity. We have a litany of films about the afterlife that stretch across all genres. They employ image, light, sound, and special effects to envision life beyond the here and now. And then we have David Lowery's *A Ghost Story*, a simple, yet profound, narrative that manages to keep us firmly grounded in the present, even as it takes us on a cosmic journey through space and time. In the process, it asks us to imagine a series of "what ifs" regarding our past, present, and future selves.





### Questions for Consideration

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1. Consider your younger self. What do you think your past self what want your current self to remember? What feelings does this create? Does this spark memories that you may have forgotten?
2. Consider your future self. What messages would you leave for her/him? What do you want your older self to not forget? How can these warnings or encouragements shape the way you live now?

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### Notes to Our Future Selves

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At the opening of *A Ghost Story*, M (Rooney Mara) tells C (Casey Affleck) about something she used to do as a child: "When I was little, and we used to move all the time, I would write these notes, and I would fold them up really small, and I would hide them in different places, so that if I ever wanted to go back, there would be a piece of me there waiting." She goes on to tell him that these notes were simply things she wanted to remember about living in that place and time. As the film progresses, one of her notes, the contents of which remain a mystery to the audience, plays a key role in the film.

M's childhood practice of leaving notes in the cracks of her homes is a childish, yet profound practice. By reaching out to her future self and hoping to one day return to her younger self, she is aware of the passage of time and its profound effect on us as individuals. This act is, ultimately, one of hope and inspiration that gives voice to our connection with nostalgia and our longing for meaning in the smallest of things. It offers viewers an opportunity for us to reflect on our own past and future and how we have been and will be different people at various stages of our lives.



## An Experience of Grief

Few experiences in life are as profound and insurmountable as the loss of a loved one. Because grief is so deeply personal, yet universal, films often struggle to faithfully or adequately convey this experience. In place of vulnerability or risk, they often rely on easy answers or empty platitudes, reactions with which many of us are also familiar in the face of death and tragedy.

On the other hand, we have a film like *A Ghost Story*, which, rather than simply talking about loss or grief or attempting to neatly resolve a survivor's experience, invites viewers to share in that experience. The film's images are based on contemplation as opposed to rapid-fire visuals or shortcuts to touch emotions. A friend leaves M comfort food and a note of encouragement; M eats almost an entire pie; M packs up C's belongings; the eerie quiet of a house replaces the laughter of children. These moments are too profound for words. *A Ghost Story* earns our emotions authentically and, in doing so, can help us deal with grief in our own lives.

## Questions for Consideration

1. Think about grief-filled moments in your life. How did you endure them? Who helped you work through them and how?
2. Think about moments in your life where words have failed to convey what you feel for another person. How did you show care and compassion for them?

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## Surrounded by Spirits

All cultures and faiths teach the importance of honoring and remembering the dead. For some, these memories are accompanied by celebrations like Día de los Muertos (the Day of the Dead) in Mexico, All Saints Day in various Christian communities around the world, or the Bon Festival in Japanese Buddhist communities, for example. Others practice somber funeral and burial services and maintain gravesites to keep memories of the departed alive.

Films are a way of remembering those who have gone on before us. We have home videos or cell phone footage of family members and friends who are no longer with us. We watch them to find happiness in difficult times. At the same time, feature films like *A Ghost Story*, while telling a story about a fictional couple, bring to mind real world relationships that we currently enjoy or that were once a part of our lives. They create space for us to renew a sense of gratitude for what these people mean or meant to us.

## Questions for Consideration

1. Who do you think is watching you? Are you living in ways that honor them and their memory?
2. In what ways does your family or community intentionally honor those who have passed on?

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### Questions for Consideration

1. Talk about this tension between the present enjoyment of life and the knowledge that it will all end. What meaning does this add to your life?
2. How do you hope your memory lives on after you are gone?

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### The Assurance of Cosmic Death

As C lingers in his home, he watches (and sometimes haunts) its subsequent inhabitants. Later in the film, he watches a party in full swing. One of the attendees holds court and talks about the tension between the endurance of the human spirit and the inevitability of death. In his speech, he claims that creativity (writing a novel or a symphony, for example) is our effort to endure, for us to "do what you can to make sure you're still around after you're gone." However, he argues that this is, ultimately, a futile effort. One day, no matter how far out into the future, humanity will cease to exist. As he says, "Future's gonna hit a brick wall."

This is the tragic beauty of humanity. Unlike other species, we are aware of our finitude and impending death. We live and love, all the while knowing that one day we will no longer be here. We long to be remembered by those we love and to leave our mark on the world, but we also know that those who will remember us will one day be gone as well. Looking at life after death offers a unique opportunity to explore life before death.



### Questions for Consideration

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1. Think about the conclusion to *A Ghost Story*. Did it surprise you? What did you make of it? What do you think it says about life and the afterlife?
2. Think about times of loss. Where have you seen life go on in the face of tragedy and grief?

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### The Cyclical Nature of Time

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As *A Ghost Story* progresses, it takes a breathtaking turn. C is thrown back into the past. He watches a family of settlers cook dinner. Time passes, and they are attacked by Native Americans. More time passes, and their corpses begin to rot and fade away. Even more time passes, and we see that C has been “haunting” the plot of land where his and M’s house will eventually be. He watches as he and M first visit the house with their realtor. As time passes and they begin to discuss a move, we see that C’s ghost was responsible for the noises that woke them in the middle of the night.

In its own unique way, this is an affirmation of an afterlife, or rather the perseverance of life after death. We lose loved ones and manage to move on and form new relationships. We move out of a house, and a new family moves in to make their own memories. Whatever belief in or opinion of life after death we have, this is a universal affirmation that can bring us hope and encouragement.