



Gates of Heaven Discussion Guide

Director: Errol Morris

Year: 1978

Time: 85 min

You might know this director from:

The Unknown Known (2013)

Tabloid (2010)

Standard Operating Procedure (2008)

The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of

Robert S. McNamara (2003)

Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr.
(1999)

Fast, Cheap & Out of Control (1997)

A Brief History of Time (1991)

The Thin Blue Line (1988)

Vernon, Florida (1981)

FILM SUMMARY

Long before Errol Morris's name was cemented into the walls of cinema history with audaciously quizzical masterpieces such as *THE THIN BLUE LINE*, *THE FOG OF WAR* or *STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE*, he was a Berkeley philosophy dropout with a deep seated love of film and a dark fascination with the famed serial killer Ed Gein. After a failed attempt to make his directorial debut on the subject, his attention was caught by a surreal headline that read, "450 Dead Pets Going to Napa Valley", and off he went, venturing off to the Golden State in search of the who, what, where and why of this bizarre situation.

It turned out that a man named Floyd "Mac" McClure had pursued his lifelong dream to start a pet cemetery, but after a series of unfortunate events, the business folded and much to the dismay of the former pet owners, all the pets previously buried on his plot had to be exhumed and relocated to a rival institution, the Bubbling Well Pet Memorial Park, which was run by John "Cal" Harberts and his two sons.

Though the events reek of human drama and grotesque mental images, Morris instead builds his narrative by setting his subjects down before the camera letting them objectively tell their side of the story. He interviews Mac and Cal and his two sons, as well as the manager at a local rendering plant and a whole host of mourning pet owners. And though the topic at hand is officially pets and how people deal with their deaths, Morris allows them to ramble on, exuding the awkward verve and somewhat hilarious eccentricities that we all carry around within ourselves in one way or another. With its simplistic formal aesthetic, *GATES OF HEAVEN* approaches death with the utmost respect by celebrating the humor inherent in the humans that memorialize it.

FILM THEMES

In its deceptive simplicity, *GATES OF HEAVEN* overflows with an all American verve, wholly singular in its vision of life, death, business and our odd relationships with our pets near and dear.

ANIMALS AS FAMILY

For many people, pets are part of the family, not just another thing that fills their homes and gives them responsibility. Exuding their own unique personalities and devoutly sharing their lives with their owners, pets are often regarded with the same sort of respect as a sibling or child. So, upon their passing, occasionally, they're thought to deserve the same kind of memorial service any other family member would receive, headstone, eulogy, casket and all.

THE UNSPOKEN BUSINESS OF DEATH

Though the businessmen that fill Morris's film display great respect for the dead and their former owners, they remain businessmen at heart. Offering to explain the many kinds of services they offer, the various plot sizes available, the many kinds of monuments available for purchase, and what styles of portraiture can be memorialized on the stones themselves, each of them reveal themselves to be quite savvy salesmen. Much more straightforward in his vocational motivations is the manager of the rendering facility, displaying a surprising lack of sympathy for those grieving for their pets.

HUMOR IN OUR HUMANITY

Despite the fact that *GATES OF HEAVEN* is indeed a film that deals head-on with how humans deal with death, by allowing his subjects to speak their mind unhindered by expectations, Morris mines a wealth of humor from within. Dealing with death is not inherently funny, but the way the pet owners speak of their former pets, the way each of the cemetery owners present themselves, or the manner in which Morris sets his frame on each of them all seem to mesh together in a stark symphony of human quirk that is strangely hilarious.

FILMED AWARE, YET UNAWARE

With *GATES OF HEAVEN*, Errol Morris laid the foundation for how he would conduct interviews down the line in his later films. We see a collection of interviewees wholly uninhibited before the camera, speaking freely of their fears, embarrassments, emotional pains, relationship problems and how they deal with all these issues seemingly without a care in the world for how they will be perceived by audiences after the fact. This on screen candidacy is one of the primary reasons why the film remains such a funny cinematic monument itself.

“In our gardens repose the remains of those that possess beauty without vanity, strength without insolence, courage without ferocity, and the virtues of man without his vices: our pets.”

Lord Byron

“If you scratch the surface of any person, you will find a world of the insane very close to that surface.”

Errol Morris

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Have you ever heard of a pet cemetery prior to seeing the film? If so, where? Do you know of any pets that have been laid to rest in a pet cemetery?
2. What did you think of Errol Morris's filming style? Did it affect how you felt about the story unfolding before you?
3. Which characters stuck out the most in your mind? Why?
4. Why do you think the filmmaker allowed his subjects to ramble on into tangents unrelated to the central pet cemetery storyline?
5. One of the interesting ideas within the film is the uncomfortable notion that death is indeed a business. Did this idea come to mind while you were watching it?
6. All of the subjects in the film feel incredibly candid, unafraid of what an audience might think of them. How do you think this might have happened? What did you think of them?
7. If you had to assign this film a set of topical genres, what would you choose?
8. Have you ever had a pet yourself? Would you speak of your pet similarly to the way the pet owners in the film do?
9. Though much of the film deals with death, both of Cal's sons speak of how they spend their time in life, both working and in leisure. Why do you think Morris included this in the film?
10. Of the many great outfits that add to the humorous texture of this film, which is your favorite and why?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- Errol Morris credits Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel for saving GATES OF HEAVEN from obscurity by not only writing positive reviews of the film, but reviewing it on their syndicated television show, AT THE MOVIES on several occasions.
- Famously, director Werner Herzog made a bet with Errol Morris that he'd eat his shoe if he were ever to finish and publicly show GATES OF HEAVEN to a paying audience. The filmmaker followed through and the event was documented by Les Blank in the short WERNER HERZOG EATS HIS SHOE.
- Since picking up the cello in 10th grade, Morris has always been an avid cello player. While in high school he spent a summer in France studying music under the acclaimed Nadia Boulanger, who also taught Morris's future collaborator Philip Glass.
- Roger Ebert listed the film in his top 10 favorite films of all time.
- Established in 1971, there are now over 12,000 pets now buried in Bubbling Well Pet Memorial Park, which featured in GATES OF HEAVEN.
- According to the Bubbling Well Pet Memorial Park website, there are five stages of one traverses after the loss of a pet: denial, bargaining, anger, grief, and finally, resolution.
- Morris got his start in filmmaking back in 1976, two years prior to GATES OF HEAVEN, by working with Werner Herzog in Plainfield, Wisconsin on his film STROSZEK.
- According to the Boston Globe, there were 469 active pet cemeteries in the US in 1977, but as of 2012, the LA Times has reported the number is down to only 291.
- Prior to making GATES OF HEAVEN, Morris was inspired by Hitchcock's PSYCHO to make a film about the serial killer Ed Gein, going so far as to conduct multiple interviews with the convicted murderer, but the project never came to fruition.
- After making GATES OF HEAVEN and the following film, VERNON, FLORIDA, Morris made his living as a private investigator before completing what would become a documentary touchstone, THE THIN BLUE LINE.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Share** this film to inspire others, and tell your own story! As is evidenced in this wonderful film, everyone has fascinating stories of their own, so document yours via writing or recording yourself recounting the tale.
2. **Follow** Errol Morris on Twitter at [@errolmorris](https://twitter.com/errolmorris) for more intriguing and often hysterical commentary in 140 characters or less.
3. **Get** a pet of your own! Not only will they become a loving member of your family, but countless animals around the world are in need of good homes. Check out your local shelter to see if you can help give a needing pet a new home.
4. **Explore** your community in search of its own odd and intriguing locales! Every city has its own character just waiting to be found.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.