

# STUDY GUIDE



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## IN THE HEIGHTS

A film by JON M. CHU and LIN-MANUEL MIRANDA

USA / 2021 / 143 min  
English and Spanish with English subtitles

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## BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM:

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Before watching a film, it is important to know the current events and history of the country that film comes from. Learning about the filmmaker is also a relevant way to gain insight on the context in which the film was produced. You can learn more about Jon M. Chu and Lin-Manuel Miranda at <https://pragda.com/film/in-the-heights/?sfc=1>.

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### INTRODUCING THE FILM

A **film synopsis** is a piece of text designed to summarize the film's narrative, genre, style, and key participants in a way that appeals to a wide audience. The synopsis is part of the film's marketing process and tends to follow a traditional format. Read this synopsis for *In The Heights*.

An exuberant musical and visual feast created by Lin-Manuel Miranda, *In the Heights* is a love letter to the Washington Heights neighborhood and an homage to the diverse Latinx communities of Upper Manhattan.

The scent of warm coffee hangs in the air just outside of the 181st St. subway stop, where a kaleidoscope of dreams rallies a vibrant and tight-knit community.

At the intersection of it all is a likable and magnetic bodega owner Usnavi, who hopes, imagines, and sings about a better life. For him, the dream is not only to return to the happy Dominican Republic of his childhood but also, to finally ask the intimidating Vanessa out on a date. An aspiring fashion designer, Vanessa dreams of leaving her dead-end beauty salon job and moving downtown to pursue her passion career. Smart college student Nina yearns to reinstate her identity as a Latina on the heels of her dispiriting year at the white-dominant Stanford. Ultimately, Usnavi and the residents of the close-knit neighborhood get a dose of what it means to be home.

- ❑ From the film synopsis, can you imagine the genre and tone of the film? From this same text, try to identify the main events of the film's plot and the socio-political context of the film.
- ❑ Do you think that the film will have a political message? Cite specific language from the synopsis to support your answer.
- ❑ How do the trailer, poster, and still images encourage you to watch the film?
- ❑ Viewing the marketing materials alone (i.e. trailer, poster, and still images available at <https://pragda.com/film/in-the-heights/?sfc=1>) without the aid of the synopsis, can you make any assumptions regarding what the film is about?



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## AFTER WATCHING THE FILM:

### NARRATIVE

- ❑ Describe the setting of the specific neighborhood in the film. What makes this neighborhood unique?
- ❑ Why does Usnavi want to go back to the Dominican Republic? Why does he decide not to go?
- ❑ Why does Nina not want to return to Stanford? Do you think she makes the right decision in the film?
- ❑ Reflect on Nina and her father's relationship. What does their relationship tell you about the immigrant experience?
- ❑ How do each of the characters handle their cultural background?
- ❑ What do you make of the love triangle between Benny, Nina, and Lincoln? How do their relationships change as the film progresses?
- ❑ What is the symbolism of the lottery ticket in the film? What does the lottery mean to the community?
- ❑ What do you think about the film's ending? Was it surprising to you? Explain your response.
- ❑ Imagine this same story told in the form of a drama or a documentary, instead of a musical. How would a change in genre may have affected the narrative?

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### CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES

- ❑ Describe the film's cinematography referencing specific choices in color, lighting, camera lenses and angles, etc.
- ❑ What do these cinematic choices tell you about the characters and their community.
- ❑ In the Heights is an adaptation of a Broadway musical. What does the film offer spectators that a musical on a stage cannot? What might the Broadway musical version offer that the film cannot?
- ❑ Try to think about two or three shots that really spoke to you -- what about them is significant? Why do they stick out in your mind?
- ❑ How does music help the audience better understand the immigrant experience and adaptation process from their home country to the United States?





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## THEMES

- ❑ Home is an important aspect of the film. What defines home to the characters in the film? Do you think anyone finds home by the end of the film? If so, describe who and how?
- ❑ How does the film explore the theme of the American dream?
- ❑ Do you know any other films portraying immigration stories? Do they have anything in common with In the Heights?
- ❑ What aspects of an immigration story were you expecting to see in the film but didn't?
- ❑ What do you think is the meaning of the film? What messages does it communicate to the audience?

