

# **In America Film Summary**

## **In America by Jim Sheridan**

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## Context

The plight of the American immigrant has seldom been chronicled as realistically and lovingly as in *In America*. Johnny and Sarah decide to bring their small family to America after the terrible death of their son Frankie from cancer. They and their two daughters, Christy and Ariel, try to adjust to their new surroundings and start a new life, leaving the past behind them.

In Johnny and Sarah's new home in New York City, the family faces many difficulties. The apartment is falling apart and doesn't have air conditioning. No matter how hard they try, they struggle to get ahead. When Christy and Ariel become friends with Mateo downstairs, the family begins to realize how lucky they really are.

Mateo is dying from AIDS, and around the time they meet, Sarah becomes pregnant. He reassures her that everything will be okay. While Mateo is dying, Sarah goes into labor with her and Johnny's youngest child, who they name after Mateo. Although the child stays in the hospital for awhile, they are finally able to bring her home, and their new life in the States truly begins to come together.

Jim Sheridan bases *In America* partially on the struggles of his own family in New York City during the 1980s. After grappling with life in New York, he went home to Ireland to create the critically acclaimed film *My Left Foot* (1989). He also has directed *The Field* (1990) and *In the Name of the Father* (1993).

Paddy Considine plays the role of the father, Johnny. After his role in *The Last Resort* (2000), Paddy finally began getting the attention he deserved. He also appeared in films such as *Born Romantic* (2000), *Dead Man's Shoes* (2004), *My Summer of Love* (2004) and *Cinderella Man* (2005).

Samantha Morton began her career by performing in television versions of classic books such as *Jane Eyre*. She has also appeared in film roles in *Sweet and Lowdown* (1999), *Pandaemonium* (2000), *Minority Report* (2002) and *The Libertine* (2004).

Djimon Hounsou gives an incredible performance as Mateo, Johnny and Sarah's dying neighbor. Hounsou was born and raised in Africa but made his name as a successful male model in Paris and London. One of his first major roles was as Juba in *Gladiator* (2000) before performing in *The Four Feathers* (2002), *Beauty Shop* (2005) and *The Island* (2005).

*In America* was nominated for three Oscars: Best Actor in a Supporting Role for Djimon Hounsou; Best Actress in a Leading Role for Samantha Morton; and Best Writing, Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen for Jim Sheridan, Naomi Sheridan and Kirsten Sheridan.



## Summary and Analysis

As the film begins, a girl says that there are some things you should wish for and some things you shouldn't. She says that her little brother, Frankie, also told her that she only had three wishes, and she believed him. The audience then sees Christy and her family in the car waiting to go over the border from Canada into America. A young Ariel, Christy's little sister, yells that they are on holiday to the officer and also tells him that her dad is out of work. Another officer asks why they want into America. Christy talks to Frankie, her dead brother, and begs him to help them get across. Finally, the officer talks to the girls and welcomes the family to America. Christy has now used up her first wish.

The family heads to New York City, and Christy is surprised that they have to go below the water to get to the city. The family is amazed by the city and all the lights. After looking all over Manhattan, they find a house run by a man who screams. The man becomes upset that Christy has a camera. The neighbors are concerned that the children will be living in the building. They finally decide to help them out, though, and show them to their rooms.

When Ariel wants to know why the family is living in this house, Christy explains that no one in Manhattan wants children in their building. They enter an old apartment with numerous locks for safety. Johnny isn't sure how they'll pay for the place, but he and Sarah realize they have no choice but to try for the children.

There are pigeons in the apartment, but Ariel wants to keep them as pets. Johnny says they need to let them go, though. Christy feels like all their problems are finally coming to an end. The whole family works together to make the apartment a beautiful place to live. Ariel, in the meantime, becomes friends with everyone. When Sarah can't get a job teaching, she works in an ice cream parlor so that Johnny can go to auditions.

As the months pass, Johnny fails to find a job. He works on getting running water in the shower and improving the house as he tries to find a new job. Sarah, on the other hand, comes home exhausted at the end of the day from her job.

One day at home, Johnny is trying to practice when Ariel gets upset that her skin is like prunes. He walks out to see Sarah, and she tells him that it's too hot. Johnny goes to find an air conditioner and brings one home for his family. He struggles to get it upstairs so that they can finally have some relief from the heat. When he discovers that he has the wrong type of plug, he begins to yell.

Soon after, at a store, Johnny doesn't have enough money to pay for what he needs. He asks to pay for the rest the next day, but the guy refuses because people living in that building have let him down before.

Johnny and Sarah have just a little food because they are so poor. Johnny gets some money and buys what they need for the air conditioner. Finally, the air conditioner



works, and they can survive the hot city summers. After a moment, though, the breaker blows, and everything goes dark.

Christy tells the audience that the family got outside as fast as possible. After getting money out of the bank, they go see a movie. At a restaurant, Ariel talks about how much she misses her friends. Christy only plays with and tells secrets to her camcorder, and Ariel feels left out and deserted by both her parents as well.

The family goes to a street festival later, and Christy films the crowd. Johnny tries to win a prize for Ariel but loses. He keeps playing to win his money back. He almost wins but keeps missing and wastes a lot of their money. Finally, though, he can't afford anything else, and they have spent all their money.

Although the family has lost almost everything, Johnny convinces Sarah to give him the rent money so that he can try to win the doll and all his money back. Sarah tells him that both she and the kids believe that he can win that doll, so he tries again. He loses again, but when Johnny uses the rest of the rent money to try one last time, Christy makes another wish from Frankie. This time, Johnny wins.

In the apartment building, a disturbed-looking man, Mateo, looks out at the family from a door that reads "Keep Out." Johnny plays around with his children, and they run into their apartment. Inside, Johnny falls to the ground, and when he takes off the blindfold, he stops and realizes that he was looking for Frankie.

Johnny stands still and tells Sarah, and she convinces him to go back and play with the girls. She watches, through her tears. Sarah calls to Johnny that he didn't find her. He tells her he wasn't looking, because there's nowhere she could hide that he wouldn't find her. Sarah sends the children to the store and takes some time with her husband.

The girls go down to the ice cream parlor and tell the woman that their parents are playing upstairs. Sarah begins to undress, and the blindfolded Johnny tries to find her. He finally catches her, and he asks where the kids are. She tells him everything's okay. She begins to undress him while the children enjoy ice cream downstairs.

Mateo looks out the window as a storm begins. He then begins attacking a wall and throwing things around his apartment. Johnny and Sarah have sex as the storm rages outside, and Mateo goes crazy. Then, Christy says that was the moment the baby was conceived.

Afterwards, Sarah turns away from Johnny, and he asks what's wrong. He's worried that it wasn't good. She won't respond to him, and she begins to cry. She tells him that Frankie had his eyes too, and Johnny falls back on the bed. She asks him to blame her since she wasn't there to catch him when he fell, but Johnny won't blame her.

Johnny takes a night job driving a cab so that the girls can go to a Catholic school. The girls enjoy their school, and the family continues living a normal life. Johnny leaves the girls in the cab one day while auditioning. They talk to a man on the radio, and he asks where their dad is and where they are. The girls tell him how to find them.



Sarah is at the doctor getting checked out while the audience watches Mateo fixing himself some food and listens to the girls singing. Sarah then comes home and tells Johnny that she's pregnant. He's concerned because of the doctor's warnings after she had Frankie. Later, Johnny sees the girls dressed up for their play. They give a man on the street some money and go into the show. Christy tries to explain to Ariel why some men dress up as women in New York.

On Halloween, the girls trick or treat in their building, but no one answers their doors. Then, they go to Mateo's door and knock. He is inside developing photographs when they knock. He finally yells to ask who's there, and they begin banging on the door even more. He yells at them to read the sign on the door, and they dare each other to knock.

Finally, Mateo goes to the door and yanks it open. He just stares at them and asks if they're the ones from upstairs. They say yes. He jokes with them about coming all the way to America to trick or treat. He invites them in and asks if there are only two of them. He looks out the door and realizes that they are alone.

When everything gets quiet, Johnny asks if everything is all right, and Sarah says yes. The girls talk to Mateo as they wander around his apartment. They look at photographs of the building, and he tells him that the house is magic. Ariel talks about Frankie as Johnny listens outside. The girls explain that Frankie had a brain tumor from the fall, and then he died. Mateo begins to cry, and Ariel explains that Frankie's in heaven now. They are worried about Mateo's hands, but he explains it is just spaghetti sauce. Mateo looks for candy for the girls, but when he doesn't have any, he gives them a jar of change.

Upstairs, the girls tell Johnny and Sarah how nice Mateo is. They also explain that Mateo only had medicine in his refrigerator. Sarah wants to invite him to dinner, but Johnny is concerned. Apparently, though, Sarah gets her way, as Mateo shows up at dinner soon after. He gets a coin in his bread, and the girls explain that he'll get rich. Mateo tells the girls that Halloween is the day of ancestors, when the dead come back to visit. Mateo says that the spirits say that they are ignored. Mateo gets a ring as well, which means that he'll get married.

A week or so later, Mateo plays with the children while Sarah watches. Johnny comes home and sees paint on a pillow in his room. He is upset and comes in to see Sarah, Mateo and the girls lying together. Mateo shows pictures of his family when they were rich in South Africa. Sarah and Mateo talk about his past and the words used for different people.

Later that night, Johnny and Sarah watch *Grapes of Wrath* while Johnny practices for his part. She finally convinces him to come to bed, and she explains that she's happy about something Mateo said. Mateo told her that everything would be okay and that the baby would bring its own luck.

Soon after, Johnny and Sarah look at the baby with an ultrasound. Sarah had thought she'd miscarried because she hasn't felt the baby move in a couple of weeks. They



doctor tells her that the baby can't go full term because it would be very dangerous to Sarah's health. They tell her that she'd have to be very brave to make it.

Johnny and Sarah tell the girls that Sarah is pregnant, and the girls ask about what the doctors said before about Sarah being unable to have more babies. Then, the baby begins to kick. Johnny can't feel it kicking, and Sarah becomes upset. She tells him that he's a bad actor because he can't feel anything, and Johnny reminds her that this baby isn't Frankie. He can't understand how putting her life on the line for the baby will do the family any good, but she insists on having it. Johnny barges out of the apartment, and Sarah is scared.

In Mateo's apartment, Mateo hears the commotion, and Johnny ends up at his door. Johnny follows Mateo inside and begins yelling at him. Johnny feels that the baby will bring death for Sarah. Mateo says that Johnny doesn't believe, and Johnny asks what he's supposed to believe in. Johnny explains that he can't believe in God because He didn't take Johnny instead of Frankie. Now Johnny is just a ghost who can no longer feel.

Johnny asks if Mateo would like to be in his place, and Mateo says he only wishes. Johnny asks Mateo if he's in love with Sarah. Mateo says he's in love with Johnny, Sarah and the kids, even the baby; he even loves Johnny's anger and everything else that lives. Johnny realizes at last that Mateo is dying; Johnny apologizes and leaves.

Christy performs "Desperado" at a school play, and viewers see Johnny, Sarah and all of New York City. We also see videos that Christy has taken over the years of the family. Johnny and Sarah lie in bed that night, and he apologizes for being so scared. They feel like their entire lives are make-believe as they try to deal with the loss of Frankie. She begs him to pretend to be happy for their children.

Johnny waits out in the rain to attend an audition, and then viewers see him driving his taxi later. Christy thinks that everyone in New York is an actor. One night, Christy hears cries for help outside. They think something's wrong with Mateo and run to check on him. Mateo has passed out in the hall, and Christy tries to give CPR to Mateo like she did to Frankie. The other guys in the house tell her not to because it's different with Mateo, and then Sarah runs in as Mateo wakes up. Ariel gives Mateo some of her magic lemon drops. He takes one and thanks Ariel for saving his life.

Johnny kicks a complaining man out of his cab so that he doesn't have to listen to him anymore. Upstairs in bed at the apartment, Ariel asks Christy what's wrong with Mateo. Christy says that she won't get the disease (AIDS) from kissing him while doing CPR.

A couple months later, the girls play outside in the snow with Mateo, Johnny and Sarah. Mateo and Johnny get into a snowball fight, but as they play, Mateo falls, exhausted, into a swing. He asks Johnny about Frankie and Johnny says that he was a little warrior. Mateo says that he was a warrior not afraid to go the other side of life. Then they watch a movie outside.



Soon after, the girls go to see Mateo, who is now very sick. Ariel can't understand why the lemon drops don't work anymore. Ariel asks why he has sores, and he beckons her to come closer. He tells her a secret: he's an alien like E.T. He says that his skin is just too sensitive for the Earth. She asks if he's going home like E.T., and he says that he will go soon. He begins to cry as she makes him promise to say goodbye.

Ariel tells Mateo about the baby and asks for a name for the baby. She wants to call it after him, and then Mateo drops his head and gets very quiet. Sarah has to go into the hospital, and Christy tries to be careful with her wishes because if everything isn't perfect, either the baby or her mom will die. As they leave, the nurse tells Johnny that they'll need the check for \$5,000 by Friday.

At lunch, Christy and Ariel help Johnny practice for his next audition. They are certain that he'll get the part. Christy is concerned that they're going to have to sell the camcorder, but Johnny tries to reassure her. A man crosses a busy street to see Johnny for money he owes him. The man gives Johnny some food stamps, and Johnny finally accepts and thanks the man.

That night, the girls point out that their dad forgot to say the prayer. The girls miss their mom, and Christy says the prayer for them. She prays about all the things that she wants to prevent or have so that they will all be safe and happy. Ariel wakes up later and tells Johnny that he's not her real dad. She begins to scream for Sarah, but he wipes off her face with water and convinces her that he really is her dad.

Christy then tells viewers that the spring came, but Sarah's baby came too early. Sarah cries in the floor of the hospital, and Johnny comes to the hospital. The baby is born, and Sarah sends Johnny to check on it. The girls wait in the hallway. The baby is stabilized for now but will need a blood transfusion in the next couple of hours.

Johnny goes in to see Sarah and reassures her that everything will be okay. He tells her about the transfusion and asks her to sign the consent form. Sarah doesn't want the baby to be given bad blood since she believes that's what happened to Frankie. She begins to blame Johnny for Frankie's death and begins to ask for Frankie. Johnny reminds her that Frankie is gone. He holds her down and calls for the doctor. She begs him to save the baby, and he promises that he will.

The doctor talks to Johnny about possible solutions. Christy says that her blood type is O negative. She offers to give blood but is afraid that she has Mateo's disease. Johnny says it's impossible because God wouldn't let it happen, and Christy points out that he doesn't believe in God. Ariel is scared that everyone is dying. Christy offers to give the blood, and Johnny agrees. The doctor goes off to make preparations.

Christy tells Johnny not to call her a little girl since she's been carrying the family ever since Frankie died. She feels that it's her fault that he died and she lived. Christy talked to him every night until she realized that she was talking to herself. She wants her father to understand that Frankie was her brother too. The lady from the ice cream parlor takes Ariel home while Christy gives blood. She is scared but happy because she feels





special. She wonders whether Frankie knew he was going to die. Johnny returns home and slams the door of the cab.

Upstairs, Johnny talks about how he will never cry again after Frankie's death to Mateo, who is now on oxygen. Johnny expected Mateo to wake up and hold his hand, and that everything would be okay. He is upset that Mateo said everything would be okay and it's not. Johnny wants a miracle. In the hallway, Johnny ignores his neighbor. The guy asks for money and then holds Johnny at gunpoint and tries to rob him. Johnny gets the gun and attacks the guy.

At the hospital, Christy says the family is waiting for the baby to show some sign of life, but she just keeps lying there. In the hospital, Mateo wakes up and begins talking in his native language. At that same moment, the baby begins to open her eyes, move around and cry. Johnny and Sarah let her hold their fingers as someone puts down Mateo's lifeless hand. Christy watches outside the room and smiles at her new baby sister.

Christy tells the audience that the hospital bill arrived and was \$30,000. When Johnny tries to pay the bill, he discovers that Mateo has already paid it. Johnny finally gets a part in the play, and Sarah Mateo, the baby, is finally returning home from the hospital. The neighbors all want a look at the baby as they return home.

A few days later, Ariel sits sadly in their apartment. She is upset that Mateo never said goodbye. There is a party in the apartment for the new baby. Johnny watches Ariel wandering around sadly while Christy records the baby.

Later that night, the girls clean up, and Christy and Johnny sit outside. She sees the full moon and the stars. He asks her if she can't see Mateo flying past the moon on his bike, waving goodbye to Ariel. They decide to tell Ariel. She doesn't see him, but finally she says she sees him too and begins waving goodbye. They ask him to look after Frankie. Then, Christy asks for her third wish and tells her father to say goodbye to Frankie. Johnny says goodbye and begins to cry.

Christy and Ariel go inside to get Sarah to go out to Johnny. They embrace, and the viewers see the recording of Mateo playing in the snow on the television inside. Christy says that it was as hard for Frankie to smile when he found out about the tumor as it was for her dad to cry after.

The audience sees a recording of Frankie smiling. She decides to turn off the video camera so that she can have a memory of Frankie that she can see forever. She says it's just like when the screen fades, and we have a clear view of her in our minds. Christy says that when viewers go back to reality, she's going to ask Frankie to "please, please let me go."



# Characters

## Johnny, played by Paddy Considine

### Description

Johnny is a loving husband and father. He wants only the best for his family, so he brings them to America. They believe that in America everything will suddenly get better, but Johnny quickly discovers that Manhattan isn't at all like what he expected.

Johnny has big dreams of becoming an actor. Although he is talented, the city is full of actors and most people aren't looking for anyone else. Johnny struggles through months of frustration before he finally gets a decent job.

Like the rest of the family, Johnny still struggles to get over the death of his young son, Frankie. He knows that the new baby can't take his place, and Johnny is terrified that something will happen to Sarah too. In the end, everything works out just fine, and Johnny is able to enjoy another child with his family.

### Analysis

Johnny tries to be the best father and husband he knows how to be. His mourning for his son, though, still gets in his way. He can't seem to get past Frankie's death and move himself and his family into the future. Johnny has closed off his heart so that he will never cry again, but as they face new challenges, he learns that he has to keep on loving no matter what.

Johnny has a tremendous work ethic. He continues to practice as much as he can, even when his hopes of making it seem impossible. He works long days and nights and finds that he is jealous of the time Mateo spends with his family. Eventually, he gets a good job, and Johnny is finally able to balance work and family.

## Sarah, played by Samantha Morton

### Description

Sarah is Johnny's wife. She was also devastated by Frankie's death, but she continues to stand by her family and love her daughters. She believes in Johnny and works long hours at an ice cream shop so that he can keep auditioning.

When Sarah becomes pregnant, she is thrilled. In some way, she seems to think that this new child can take Frankie's place, and no matter how much Johnny tries to talk her out of it, she insists on going through with the pregnancy.



## Analysis

Sarah is full of hope for the family's new lives. Although she is stressed and distraught, she tries to keep a good attitude. She works hard to make sure that their new home becomes beautiful rather than remaining the dump it was when they moved in. When times get hard, Sarah takes a job so that the family can keep eating.

Sarah finds that Mateo's presence helps bring her hope. She is excited about the new baby and loves hearing from Mateo that everything will be okay even when Johnny and the girls are skeptical. When Sarah does finally have the baby, it's as if the family is reborn as well.

## Christy, played by Sarah Bolger

### Description

Much of the story is told through the eyes of Christy, Johnny and Sarah's oldest daughter. She misses her little brother Frankie terribly, but she believes that he is still with them. She even makes wishes and asks him for help when the family is in trouble.

Christy is excited about their new home, but she is realistic enough to know that everything isn't perfect when they move in. She sees the neighborhood with the eyes of a child who has been protected from the more difficult side of life.

Christy protects her little sister and tries to take care of her parents after they move to New York. Until they seem to be able to take care of themselves, she tries to run the family. After the baby is born, both Christy and her parents are ready to move on with their new lives.

### Analysis

Christy is a bright young girl. She understands most of what has been going on with her family over the past few years and has taken up much of the responsibility for worrying about everything. She seems too old for her years after she has watched her beloved brother die from cancer.

Christy and Mateo form a special relationship. He gives her the attention and advice that she needs so much. After she saves his life by doing CPR, their bond grows even greater. Although he dies at the end of the film, she feels like he has left her new sibling to take his place.



## **Ariel, played by Emma Bolger**

### **Description**

Ariel is Christy's little sister. She is young and innocent. When she gives out lemon drops, she believes that she is healing those she loves.

### **Analysis**

Ariel is not a major part of the story, in part because she is so young that she only sees the world through a child's eyes. She serves as a friend for Christy and helps change things. For example, it was her idea to knock on Mateo's door, and because of this, the family gains a new friend.

## **Mateo, played by Djimon Hounsou**

### **Description**

Mateo is a painter who lives in the same building as Johnny and Sarah. At first, he seems to be evil, as he is always shown with a pained look on his face or throwing things around his apartment. Appearances, though, are deceptive, and Mateo's behavior is explained by his illness.

Eventually, Mateo becomes friends with the family, but Johnny becomes jealous of the time Mateo spends with his wife and children. When Johnny confronts him, he learns that Mateo is dying of AIDS and that his family is the last enjoyment that Mateo has.

### **Analysis**

Mateo serves as a friend and companion to everyone in the family. After Sarah becomes pregnant, Mateo reassures her that everything will be okay, much to Johnny's chagrin. Mateo also gives solid advice to Johnny and comforts Christy and Ariel during the difficult days.

Mateo is a kind, gentle man who is regretting the times that he will not have in his life. He loves Johnny and Sarah's family and takes them as his own. Although he dies at the end of the film, they name their new child after him.



## Frankie, played by Ciaran Cronin

### Description

Frankie is Johnny and Sarah's son who died before they came to America. Frankie had a brain tumor, so they had to watch him suffer before his death. The entire family is still distraught, and Christy still talks to him and makes wishes to him.

### Analysis

Frankie provides a history for the family to explain their lives. Also, he remains as a friend to Christy while she tries to adjust to a new life in a faraway place. Finally, though, she is ready to let him go and move on with her life.



# Themes

## Falling in Love with Life

After Frankie's death, Johnny and Sarah stopped their lives. They cannot seem to get beyond his death, and they neglect their daughters to some extent because of their preoccupation with his death.

When the family meets Mateo, he loves spending time with their family. While Johnny is gone all the time, Mateo is constantly spending time with Sarah and the girls. Johnny becomes jealous and accuses Mateo of being in love with Sarah, but Mateo responds that he is in love with life. Johnny realizes that Mateo is dying.

Mateo teaches viewers about the love of life that all people need to live happy, successful lives. Johnny and Sarah finally learn that although their son's death was tragic, they can move on with their lives for the sake of their children.

## Strength of Family

Family can be the greatest part of life. Most people cannot survive their experiences without the love and support of their families. Johnny, Sarah and the girls learn that their family is strong and can survive anything.

Johnny and Sarah's family is on the verge of falling apart when they move to New York and meet Mateo. They have almost given up on each other and their relationship, but the girls and their desire to start over keeps the young couple going.

Throughout the film, the family grows both in numbers and in strength. They learn from each other and Mateo how important the bond and support of family is and that they cannot possibly survive without each other. Finally they discover the strength already in their family and survive against all odds.

## Importance of Retaining Hope

When in a new town and starting life over, many people might find it easy to lose hope, but Johnny and Sarah quickly realize that it is their only hope. Without hope, they cannot survive all the trials they face.

Mateo inspires Johnny and Sarah as he retains hope in spite of his imminent death. Mateo has AIDS, and he doesn't expect to survive for much longer. Although Mateo struggles with the issue, he remains hopeful despite the terrible knowledge of his illness.

Johnny and Sarah become pregnant soon after they move, even though she is not supposed to be pregnant again because of the risks to her health. Sarah is hopeful, and Johnny eventually realizes that he needs the same hope in order for them to survive the terrible trials of the pregnancy and their new life. With their hope intact, the family survives all their struggles.

# Style and Cinematography

*In America* is the story of immigrants who move to the States from all over the world. The truths behind why they come, where they go and what they do are revealed in this film. Viewers see the struggles in the stark light of reality, but we also see the triumph of the human spirit against all odds.

The cinematography in the film is excellent. Although most of the film seems stark and realistic so that viewers realize that this is not just a story but real life, there are also sections where the dreams of the characters come true and the film seems to be part of a fantasy world.

There are few characters in this film, so these actors take responsibility for the movement of the film. The choices could not have been better, as the actors who play Johnny, Sarah, Christy and Mateo give excellent performances and bring this world and this story to life.





# Motifs

## AIDS

AIDS is a major problem in America and around the rest of the world. Although treatments have been found to slow down the progress of the disease and allow those who have HIV to lead fairly normal lives, there are still no cures. Although the film doesn't come out directly and talk about finding a cure, Mateo's death offers an implied commission.

When viewers first meet Mateo, we have no real clues that he has AIDS. He has medicine in his refrigerator that could be for any disease, and no one in the family seems to think much of it either. The first time we know there is a major problem is when the men try to stop Christy from giving Mateo CPR.

As the film progresses, the audience sees the slow rebirth of the family after Frankie's death and the slow death of Mateo from AIDS. The contrast of rebirth and death adds emotion to the film and shows how new life and love can grow even in the face of death.

## Death of a Loved One

Before Johnny and Sarah came to America, they had three children: Christy, Ariel and a young son named Frankie. Frankie was a wonderful little boy, but after an accident, the doctors discovered that he had a brain tumor. The family had to watch him die a slow, painful death.

Everyone in the family, including Christy, in some way blames themselves for Frankie's death. They all feel that there should have been something more they could do, even though they did their best. Christy misses Frankie and still talks to him since she believes that he is watching over them.

At some point in life, most people will experience the death of a loved one. Since the feelings of grief and mourning surrounding this event are widespread, it is an effective motif for a film. People can relate to the characters because of the pain they are facing in putting Frankie's death behind them.

## Immigrant Life

Jim Sheridan was an immigrant to America in the 1980s. For years, he wanted to make a film partially based on what he and his family experienced during their time in New York. *In America* is that film.



Most Americans do not understand the hardships of immigrant life. We know little about it other than that many people immigrate illegally every year. This film helps Americans have sympathy for the hard working people who come here looking for a better life.

Viewers see the struggles that Johnny and Sarah face and how bravely they overcome them. They work together so that he can pursue his career and they can put their family back together. The film serves as a lens into this life that immigrants can appreciate and from which the rest of us can learn.



# Symbols

## Mateo's Medicine

When the girls meet Mateo, they find that his refrigerator has very little food but a lot of medicine. They ask if he's sick, but he simply changes the subject. Neither the girls nor the viewers think much of the medicine until Johnny confronts Mateo about spending so much time with his family.

At this point, Mateo admits that he is dying of AIDS. He has to take his medicines to slow down the progress of the disease, but eventually even the medicine won't be able to help him. Mateo has fallen in love with life since becoming sick and plans to live it to the fullest as long as he can.

Mateo's medicine is symbolic both of a desire for life and the need for a cure for AIDS. He loves his life, but without a cure, nothing can really be changed. The medicines available simply aren't enough, and Mateo finally dies at the end of the film, just as Johnny and Sarah's new child is being born.

## The Wishes

Before Frankie died, he told Christy that she only had three wishes, so she should use them carefully. Now that he's gone, she talks to him almost daily, and when she wants to make a wish, she asks him to help the family and make her wish come true. The wishes symbolize two things: holding on to the past and hoping for the future.

Christy makes the wishes because she is holding on to her past life with her family and with Frankie. She was very close to the little boy and believes that if she doesn't hold on, she will somehow forget about him. She is also convinced that he can help make her wishes come true.

On the other hand, Christy uses the wishes to hope for a better future for the family. She wishes for things that will make their life easier and hopes that they will come true. In the end, she uses her final wish for the baby and then asks Frankie to let her go so that she can enjoy their new life without pain.

## The Weather

In many films and books, the weather is symbolic of what is happening either to the characters or to their souls. The weather serves as a foreshadowing technique as well, so that viewers are clued in as to whether something good or something bad is coming their way.



One example of this in *In America* is the scene where it begins to pour down rain. Johnny and Sarah are upstairs making love in their apartment during a huge storm while the girls eat ice cream in the shop. Although this is a wonderful night, the rain foreshadows the difficulties that will come with the pregnancy conceived during this beautiful moment.

In the other side of the building, Mateo wrestles with himself while the rain comes down. He is struggling in his soul with grief and anger. He is dying of AIDS and realizes that his time is coming to an end. The terrible storm also represents his terrible pain.



## Essay Questions

What happens not long before Johnny and Sarah move? How does this event relate to their move?

Who does Christy talk to throughout the film? Why?

What is the biggest struggle Johnny and Sarah face?

Describe the relationship between Johnny and Sarah.

How do the girls meet Mateo? How does the viewer's perception of Mateo change after their meeting?

Why does Mateo spend so much time with the family?

How does Christy save Mateo?

Why does Sarah believe that the next baby will be okay?

Who do they name the baby after? How is this significant?

What is Christy's last wish?