The Ghost Boy
A father-son trip takes a supernatural turn

Preview: On a train trip with his dad, Luke encounters a very strange museum exhibit. We’ve paired this thought-provoking tale of the supernatural with an informational text about the Transcontinental Railroad.

Learning Objective: to explore how an author draws on historical events to shape a fictional plot

Key Skills: text evidence, figurative language, vocabulary in context, reference, mood, sensory details, character

Step-by-Step Lesson Plan
Close Reading, Critical Thinking, Skill Building

1 Preparing to Read
(5 minutes)
- Give students a few minutes to look over the story and the Close-Reading Questions in the margins.
- Read aloud the “As You Read” box on page 24.

2 Reading and Discussing
“The Ghost Boy”
(35 minutes)
- Read the story once through as a class.
DIFFERENTIATION: Students who need extra support should listen to the audio before class.
- Divide students into groups to read the story again, pausing to discuss the close-reading questions. Have students write their answers in the margins.

Answers to Close-Reading Questions
1. Text Evidence (p. 25) Luke thinks that Meadows looks like “all the other forlorn places they’ve stopped at.” He makes a sarcastic comment about how the train stopping is big excitement in Meadows. He regards the train as a “rolling torture chamber.”

2. Figurative Language (p. 25) The author means that Luke can’t see anything in either direction. This description emphasizes that Meadows is a small town with little to offer travelers. The description also underscores Luke’s misery.

3. Vocabulary in Context (p. 25) You can guess that a spur line is a short section of railroad, or a short branch line that comes off from the main railroad.

4. Reference (p. 27) The reference to the people in Pompeii is helpful because, while it might be tough to imagine a body encased in a stone slab, many people have seen photos of the Vesuvius victims covered in ash.

5. Mood (p. 27) The mood is a little creepy but still fun. The displays don’t seem to be exactly what the descriptions claim they are, but they’re weird nonetheless.
6. Sensory Details (p. 27) Answers may include:
“It’s like having aluminum foil crammed into your mouth,” “He sees a mountain, feels its ice-cold breath,” and “He has a swimmy feeling of unreality.”

7. Figurative Language (p. 27) Answers will vary. Students might say that desolation would have a sharp, sour, or bitter taste.

8. Figurative Language (p. 29) The author means that Mr. Klack’s face has a strange, unnatural look.

9. Character (p. 29) At the museum, Luke seems convinced that the ghost was real, but perhaps now he has convinced himself that he imagined the whole thing—maybe because the idea of the ghost being real is too strange or frightening.

10. Character (p. 29) Luke is afraid of the ghost and wants nothing to do with it. He’s angry because his father is forcing him to interact with it. He may also be angry because, once again, his dad is putting his own need for a story to write ahead of Luke’s wishes. His dad is forcing the ghost on him in the same way he forced the trip on him.

11. Character (p. 29) The ghost boy has been imprisoned at the museum for years. Before that, he was an exhibit in the circus. But even though he is a ghost, he still has human emotions. He wants to be free.

3 Reading and Discussing “This Railroad Changed America” (20 minutes)
- Print or project the Vocabulary Words and Definitions from Scope Online and preview the words as a class. (You may assign the activity for homework.) Highlighted words: contend, disperses, encroach, sabotaged, transcontinental, unifying, vision.
- Read “This Railroad Changed America” as a class.
- Print or project the Close-Reading Questions from Scope Online for students to discuss in groups.

4 Skill Building Featured Skill: Author’s Craft (15 minutes, activity sheet online)
Distribute the activity sheet Author’s Craft: Drawing on Historical Events. Have students work in groups to complete it. The activity will prepare students to respond to the writing prompt on page 31.

Critical-Thinking Question (5 minutes, activity sheet online)
After he takes the ghost boy from the museum, Luke’s dad justifies his action by saying, “You can’t own a ghost.” Is this a valid justification? Answers will vary. Some students might say that taking something without permission is wrong, while others might say that the ghost boy was essentially a prisoner in the museum, and Luke’s dad helped him escape. Other students may say that although the ghost boy deserved to be liberated from the museum, Luke’s dad’s motives were wrong. He wasn’t trying to set the ghost boy free; he was only trying to help himself get over his writer’s block.

What do you learn in the informational text that helps you better understand the tragedy of the ghost boy’s past? In the informational text, you learn that thousands of Chinese workers helped build the Transcontinental Railroad. They were badly treated and paid little. The ghost boy was one of these workers. He was taken advantage of in life just as he was taken advantage of in death, when his ghost was held prisoner in the museum.
Differentiation

For Struggling Readers
In a well-organized paragraph, discuss one way the author of the short story draws on a real historical event that is described in the informational text.

For Advanced Readers
Consider how the railroad is perceived by Luke in the story and by the “you” in the informational text. What makes the two points of view so different? Answer the question in a brief essay, using details from both texts to support your answer.

Complexity Factors
See how these texts will challenge your students.

Levels of Meaning/Purpose: As it raises questions about morals and priorities, the story also makes reference to the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad in the American West. The informational text explains and describes the railroad.

Structure: The story is mainly chronological and is written in the third person and in the present tense. The informational text presents chunks of information linked by a common theme.

Language Conventionality and Clarity:
• Vocabulary: higher academic and domain-specific vocabulary (berth, bleak, transcontinental, transfixed)
• Figurative Language: metaphor, rhetorical questions, personification

Knowledge Demands: the story refers to the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius and train travel.

Lexile: 790L (story); 920L (informational text)

Literature Connections
Other texts with a ghost character:
• A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens
• The Graveyard Book by Neil Gaiman
• Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets by J. K. Rowling