

TEACHING GUIDE
AMERICAN GOSPEL BY MIAH JEFFRA

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DEFINITIONS

Urban Renewal: an economic development tool used by local and federal governments. More specifically, it is a method of economically revitalizing areas determined to be areas of “blight” through public investments that stimulate private development. Modern housing complexes, shopping malls, office buildings, civic centers, sports arenas, parking lots, and college campuses all are examples of projects related to urban renewal.

Redlining: a discriminatory practice that consists of the systematic denial of services such as mortgages, insurance loans, and other financial services to residents of certain areas, based on their race or ethnicity. The term “redlining” originates with actual red lines on maps that identified predominantly-Black neighborhoods as “hazardous.” Starting in the 1930s, the government-sponsored Home Owners' Loan Corporation and the Federal Home Loan Bank Board used these maps to deny lending and investment services to Black Americans. While the most well-known examples involve denial of loans/credit and insurance, also sometimes attributed to redlining in many instances are: denial of healthcare and the development of food deserts in minority neighborhoods.

Gentrification: a process in which a poor area (as of a city) experiences an influx of middle-class or wealthy people who renovate and rebuild homes and businesses and which often results in an increase in property values and the displacement of earlier, usually poorer residents.

Disneyfication: the transformation (as of something real or unsettling) into carefully controlled and safe entertainment or an environment with similar qualities, often to create or alter in a simplified, sentimentalized, or contrived form or manner.

White Supremacy: the overt belief or unconscious bias that the white race is inherently superior to other races and that white people should have control over people of other races, or that their current position of power somehow signifies their inherent superiority as a race of people. It leads to the social, economic, and political systems that collectively enable white people to maintain power over people of other races.

Institutional Racism: also known as systemic racism, is a form of racism that is embedded in the laws and regulations of a society or an organization. It manifests as discrimination in areas such as criminal justice, employment, housing, health care, education, and political representation. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behavior that amount to discrimination through prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.

CREATIVE WRITING PROMPTS INSPIRED BY *AMERICAN GOSPEL*

- Write about a time you felt displaced or alienated from your own community. Was this a moment in school, at a workplace, among a group of friends, your neighborhood, perhaps even amongst your family? Try to capture the feeling of this alienation.
- Write a story that illustrates a fear so intense that the main character cannot perceive reality in a fully clear way. Think of Ruth Anne's struggle with determining whether Isaac's threats are bluffs or the stuff of sincere danger. Inhabit that space of uncertainty in your character.
- In the chapter where the riot takes place, all three main characters' points-of-view are collapsed without distinction. Write a scene where at least two characters in a story are written in such a way. How can you differentiate their voices—through language choice, syntax and action—so that the reader doesn't get unnecessarily confused? Think about how your character speaks, how they perceive the world around them, their education, background, ideology, and influences that inform the way they think and speak.
- Write a story or scene where three characters view the same event from their own perspective. Consider what the character values most, what makes them who they are. Then, render the way *they* experience the event. Use language choice, diction, prioritized details, to illustrate this particular way of experiencing and processing the event.
- Ruth Anne often waxes nostalgic for the east Tennessee mountains throughout the novel. Write a scene where a character longs for a place. What does that place look like, according to your character? Indulge in descriptions that reveal why the character loves the place so much. What do they value so much about this place? Why do they value it so much?
- Peter obsessively fantasizes about Jude in *American Gospel*. Write a scene where a character obsesses over another person. Is this person a love interest? Is it seething hatred of a boss or classmate? Is it an instance of severe jealousy/envy? How does your character obsess over this other person? Consider the language they use, what details they focus on. What does this obsession reveal about your character and their values?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: GENERAL CONTENT

- *American Gospel* features three characters written in first-person present PoV. What effect does this have on the reading experience? Why might the writer have chosen this strategy?
- What differences do you notice between the voices of Peter, Ruth Anne and Thomas? Identify instances where the voices are distinctive. How does that inform the reader's understanding of the characters?
- It is very obvious what Peter's external desires are in the novel. What about his internal desire? What do you think he wants of himself? What does he yearn for? What makes you think this?
- In *The Practice of Creative Writing*, Heather Sellers describes tension as "desire plus danger." Another way to phrase it would be desire versus obstacle, either internally or externally. What is Peter's primary desire? Ruth Anne's desire? Thomas' desire? What are their obstacles? External obstacle? Internal obstacle? How does that invoke dramatic tension? Which of these tensions do you find the most acute?
- How does the novel—as seen through the eyes of these three characters—illustrate Baltimore? What does this portrait of Baltimore look like? Provide concrete details and images that resonate from the chapters.
- What is the purpose of the Preludes at the beginning of each section of the novel? They are written in a distant third-person PoV, so different than the rest of the novel. What effect does that have? Why did the author make this choice?
- Each of the novel's three parts possesses a title inspired by lines from Langston Hughes' poem "Harlem." What is the significance of these titles?
- The author says that they wanted Baltimore to be a character in this novel. If you were to personify Baltimore based on what you've read, who would Baltimore be? Provide a list of characteristics.
- Who do you believe is the primary antagonist of *American Gospel*? Why do you think this?
- What themes emerge from reading *American Gospel*? Provide a trajectory of these themes? Where are they explored? How are they resolved over the course of the novel?

READER-RESPONSE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How would you personify your hometown? If it was a person, how would you characterize the place? What informs this personification?
- Which of these characters do you feel resemble you most? Why do you think this? identify places in the narrative where you see yourself reflected in the character, at least to some degree of recognition?
- Who do you believe is the more likeable character in *American Gospel*: Peter, Thomas or Ruth Anne? Why do you think this? What values or characteristics do they possess that have you feel this way?
- In some way, Thomas struggles with not knowing what he wants out of life. When have you felt this way? What did it concern? How did you address it, if you have at all? If you haven't, how do you feel about this struggle?
- In some ways, Thomas acts as a mentor to both Ruth Anne and Peter, albeit in very different ways. Who is your mentor? What makes them a mentor? What have you gleaned from your relationship with them? What impact have they had on who you are and how you live in the world?
- Peter demonstrates a rather confident sexuality for someone so young. How do you feel about his approach to his sexuality? What is your own relationship to sexuality? Is it something you discuss with friends, family, co-workers?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES: INITIAL DISCUSSION

This discussion strategy is a low-stakes way to get everyone in the room thinking and talking about the novel as a group and provides a way for students to relay their initial insights about *American Gospel*.

To begin a discussion of *American Gospel* (or excerpt), ask the students to distill their reaction to or understanding of the text into a single word, short insight, or image. Then, ask the students to come up to the board and write down their word, phrase, or picture (consider asking them to each try to use different words, being mindful of what their colleagues are writing, to avoid repetition).

After students have returned to their seats, look together at the spread of words and images on the board. You might start by acknowledging patterns (for example, something like “many of us seem to be thinking about unconscious racism when we are thinking about *American Gospel*” or “a number of us are interested in the characters’ voices”). Then, point to a particular word, phrase, or picture and ask for the writer of that word to tell the class about their choice (saying something like, “Who choose the phrase ‘poverty leads to violence?’ Tell us more about that”). As time allows, repeat this process with other words, phrases, and pictures.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES: SCAFFOLDED QUESTIONS FOR WRITING

To help with a discussion of *American Gospel*, ask students to write in response to a prompt. Particularly if your class uses journaling or regular writing exercises, this kind of opening activity can help students work out their ideas as they write, better preparing them for discussion. Such prompts might also be effective for homework assignments like reading responses or reflections. Here are some potential journal entry prompts:

- What chapter or scene seems like the heart of *American Gospel*? Why? How so? Cite specific examples from the book in your response.
- Describe a pattern or repetition of images you noticed throughout *American Gospel*, like the use of a color or the use of a word. Reference particular moments in the text, explore the effect of this pattern or repetition. What should we make of it? How does it contribute to the book as a whole?
- Choose one of the characters from the novel. Describe them: what are they like? What do they value? What do they want? Refer to specific moments in the text in your response.
- For whom is *American Gospel* written? That is, who seems to be the implied audience? What in the novel seems to offer insight into this? How so?
- Consider the narrative arc of *American Gospel*. What is the conflict? The crisis? The resolution? Point to particular instances as you describe the parts of the narrative.

Once students have journaled in response to a prompt, there are some different ways to transition into discussion. Some options here:

- Open the floor for discussion: “Tell us what you wrote about—how did you respond to this prompt?”
- Ask students to turn to a neighbor, partner, or small group, and discuss an insight from their journal entry, preparing to share their conversation with the class. Once students have discussed their journal entries in pairs or small groups, ask each group to share an interesting point from their conversations with the whole class. In beginning level sections or in classes less likely to talk, you might also encourage follow-up questions. Have the group that will speak next ask a follow-up question of the group that is sharing.
- Instead of immediately turning from writing about the prompt to discussing the text verbally, continue the discussion in writing. Ask students to pass their journals to a peer (perhaps sending journals three people to the left, for example). Then, have students read their peer’s journal entry and make a follow-up comment, writing in their peer’s journal. To what extent do they agree with their peer? To what extent do they read the text differently? How might they extend their peer’s discussion of the text? Have the students end their

response with a follow-up question for their peer. Then, ask students to return the journals to their owners. Students should write a response to the question which has been posed in their journals.

PROJECT & WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Playlist as Analysis of *American Gospel*

As you explore the trajectory of *American Gospel*'s narrative, you'll create a companion playlist of songs that matches the novel's emotional and narrative arcs. Your job is to choose three songs for each of the novel's three parts, selecting songs that resonate in some way with those moments in the text. Importantly, these songs don't need to overtly address the most obvious themes in the collection (ie, not every song needs or even should reference urban renewal or domestic violence). Rather, choose songs based on how they might complement the text, perhaps through lyrics, but also through instrumentation, mixing, tone, pace, etc. Submit your playlist as a link to a Spotify playlist.

You will also write an essay of at least 1000 words explaining the choices you made in creating and ordering your playlist. Your essay should contain all the features of a formal composition, including a clear introduction, specific and focused thesis statement, unified and cohesive paragraphs, and a conclusion. Your discussion of the playlist and its relationship to the narrative arc of *American Gospel* should rely on specific examples from the text and analysis of those examples.

Grading criteria:

Your playlist and analysis will be evaluated for the extent to which

- The playlist is complete
- The playlist is thoughtfully arranged
- The essay is fully developed, meeting all requirements of the assignment
- The playlist and essay demonstrate meaningful insight that goes beyond repetition of themes or action
- The essay makes a compelling case, supporting claims with detailed textual analysis, for the playlist choices
- The essay is effectively organized and structured
- Uses MLA formatting appropriately and is free from error

Analysis Playlist Prewriting

Instructions: For the ten songs that you've gathered for your playlist, explain how the song seems to complement the narrative of *American Gospel*, showing how it relates to the particular place in the narrative's trajectory. Remember, the songs on the playlist should complement (rather than repeat) the text, so consider selecting songs that go beyond repeating the themes of the text. This prewriting will help you start to draft your essay, in which you'll explain how your playlist matches the narrative and emotional arcs of *American Gospel*.

Song title:

Summary of song (describe its genre, theme, and project. What details are helpful to know about this song?):

Relationship of song to text (what connections do you see between this song and *American Gospel*? How does this song relate to the text? What moments in the text might you analyze to demonstrate this connection?):

Ekphrastic Visual as Analysis of *American Gospel*

For this project, you will create a well-developed and interesting ekphrastic visual for *American Gospel*, using any style or styles, and material or combination of materials. You'll use this gathering of materials to make new and interesting observations about the novel and its structure, themes and tonality. Your ekphrastic visual can be a painting, collage, sculpture, vision board, video, comic, or a combination of these forms. Collage or vision boards should make use of at least three different types of materials (texts, letters, words, fabrics, feathers, stones, toys, wrapping paper, photos, visual art, etc.), with at least one 3-D element. It should be visually arresting and interesting, some kind of pattern or arrangement (for example, you might use color, numbers, string, and other strategies to instruct the reader on how to view your board or collage). In the end, your ekphrastic visual should be a display that speaks to the kinds of questions with which *American Gospel* is concerned and helps you think more about them.

You will also write an essay of at least 1000 words explaining the choices you made in creating your ekphrastic visual for *American Gospel*. Your essay should contain all the features of a formal composition, including a clear introduction, specific and focused thesis statement, unified and cohesive paragraphs, and a conclusion. Your discussion of the ekphrastic visual and its relationship to the narrative arc of *American Gospel* should rely on specific examples from the text and analysis of those examples.

This visual assignment's goal is NOT to merely illustrate the novel, but to make visual the essence of the novel, including tone, theme, style and structure. They say a picture is worth a thousand words. How can your ekphrastic visual signify 130,000?

Grading criteria:

Your ekphrastic visual and essay will be evaluated for the extent to which

- The vision board explores your ideas about *American Gospel* in a coherent visual form
- The vision board makes use of a range of interesting materials that meet minimum requirements
- The vision board is recognizably organized
- The essay is fully developed, meeting all requirements of the assignment
- The essay demonstrates meaningful insight driven by the vision board
- The essay makes a compelling case, supporting claims with detailed textual analysis
- The essay is effectively organized and structured
- Uses MLA formatting appropriately and is free from error

Extraneous Project (or Let's Write Fanfiction!) for *American Gospel*

As the culmination of your study of *American Gospel*, you will write a creative extension of the original text. Your piece, which might be an additional section or prologue (see Buchen's essay "Belly Sea" for an example: http://thediagram.com/13_2/buchen.html) or epilogue that takes the original work as its subject matter or inspiration. This might mean exploring a new voice not currently included in the collection (like Grant or Jude or Mrs. Gabriel or Mirabelle), for example, or perhaps investigating what happens after the novel's current end. Likewise, you might write a section of flashbacks or flashforwards (what is Peter like in ten years? Or Thomas once he meets a romantic partner? Or how might Ruth Anne think about her own childhood more deeply?).

This can be written in any form you choose, whether in poems, prose, or in dialogical form like play or screenplay. For this project, you'll write frequent, detailed footnotes that account for the research and rationale you use to make choices as a writer. In this way, you will analyze and explore the text by extending it, and then support your creative work with footnotes. Your footnotes should position your writing choices as part of a larger conversation with the text. The footnotes will account for roughly 750 words of your document.

Grading Criteria:

Your piece will be evaluated for the extent to which it

- Effectively utilizes the techniques and craft strategies of the original text
- Maintains reasonable characterizations and character affects based the original text
- Demonstrates strategic use of poetic conventions, including conflict, tension, character, image, form, setting, dialogue
- Supports choices with extensive and detailed footnotes that provide evidence and reasons
- Demonstrates thoughtful analysis and understanding of the original text in the creative portion, as well as in the footnotes, which should refer to specific examples in the original text
- Relies on appropriate research and its effective incorporation in the argument
- Accurately uses MLA formatting and citations, and is free from error