

↗ DISCUSSION/ESSAY QUESTION ↗

*THE PENCIL TEST* by James Guilford

Questions are organized in increasing complexity.

1. Examine one of the main characters. Can it be said that this character has morals? How are her or his morals shown? What are the character's strengths? What are the character's weaknesses? How do you think these attributes will affect her or him in the remainder of the novel?
2. What is the relationship between the title of the book, the opening epigraph, and the themes in the book? In what ways does the title highlight themes in the novel? Your response may benefit from brief research about concepts such as apartheid and post-traumatic slave syndrome (also referred to as post-traumatic slavery syndrome and post traumatic slavery disorder).
3. How do elements of *The Pencil Test* play on assumption? For this question, consider literary elements such as plot twists and character development as well as structural elements such as the titles, openings, and ending, innuendo, and enigma. What is the purpose of this play on assumptions? How does this play on assumptions relate to themes in *The Pencil Test*?
4. Who are the main characters of the novel? Who are the protagonist and antagonist? How does the novel complicate our ideas of positive and negative characters? Why does the author choose to complicate the ideas of good and bad, right and wrong?
5. Throughout the novel, the author relies heavily on the following literary elements: anaphora, imagery, metaphor, parenthesis, and simile (for definitions of these elements, see Handout 7↗). Chose one or more of these elements and discuss the ways these elements enhance the novel's themes, motifs, and plot?
6. *Problematizing* is a process used in critical dialogue (e.g. in pedagogy) in which assumed knowledge or assumed truths are interrogated. This is usually done by restating that truth as a question or by framing narratives in ways that uncover the assumptions "hiding" beneath this "truth." What assumed truths does Guilford attempt to problematize? In what ways does the narrative interrogate these truths? Is the narrative successful? Why are why not?
7. In his article titled *White*, Richard Dyer makes the following assertion: "[I]f the invisibility of whiteness colonises the definition of other norms—class gender, heterosexuality, nationality and so on—it also masks whiteness as itself a category. White domination is then hard to grasp in terms of characteristics and practices of white people." (p 46) How does Guilford's narrative "unmask" whiteness? In what ways does the narrative argue with racial categorization? How does the novel reveal white privilege? How does the novel undermine the concept of white privilege? In other words, in what ways does *The Pencil Test* posit a type of "black privilege"?
8. The author of *The Pencil Test* admits an investment in postmodern and postpositive ideology. Central to these outlooks is a belief in subjectivity, in the absences of a single or absolute truth, and in the ability of the individual to determine meaning and purpose. How are post-modern ideas communicated in the text? Where does the text deviate from these ideas? For what purpose? Can *The Pencil Test* be called a postmodern text? Can it be seen as engaging in critical race theory? Explain your position.

9. “As commonly understood,” writes Richard Morin in his June 2005 Washington Post Article titled *The Price of Acting White*, “acting white is a pejorative term used to describe black students who engage in behaviors viewed as characteristic of whites, such as making good grades, reading books or having an interest in the fine arts. The phenomenon is one reason some social thinkers give to help explain at least a portion of the persistent black-white achievement gap in school and in later life.” In what ways has this theory of “acting white” influenced the narrative of *The Pencil Test*? Do you think the author agrees or disagrees with the position that acting white is a burden for black students—that the pressure to act a certain way impedes black students’ success? (For more information on “the burden of acting white” refer to the seminal study by Ogbu and Fordam “Black Students' School Success: Coping with the 'Burden of 'Acting White.'”). How does the narrative complicate these ideas?
10. Names are used as a motif in Guilford’s novel. One primary example is the name of the main character, Kendry (Kendra/Umoja). Consider the names of characters, places, and organizations—pay special attention the acronyms of black organizations on the first page of Chapter 29. What patterns emerge? What is Guilford positing about the significance of names? What ideas are being subverted? Challenged? Questioned? How would you describe Guilford’s position on blackness? On black radical propaganda? On categorization?
11. “Why does *nigger* generate such powerful reactions?” asks Randall Kennedy in his book *NIGGER: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*. “Is it a more hurtful racial epithet than [other] insults...Should blacks be able to use *nigger* in ways forbidden to others?” What do you think is the author’s position on this word? Do you agree or disagree with the author’s position? Explain. (Reference the first chapter of Kennedy’s book at the Washington Post’s website: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/books/chap1/nigger.htm>).