

# Alliance Theatre

## *institute*

### Study Guide *Covenant*

Created as part of the Alliance Theatre's Dramaturgy by Students program  
by Vallea Woodbury, Teaching Artist  
with: Dr. Shana Hunt-Martin, Creative Writing Teacher  
and: Senior Creative Writing students at the DeKalb School of the Arts



**By playwright:**

York Walker

Directed by Tinashe Kajese-Bolden

October 8-November 9, 2025

Hertz Stage

#### **CONTENT WARNING**

*COVENANT* depicts drinking and acts of violence, including gun violence & domestic violence; addresses mature content including sex & sexuality.

Best enjoyed by audiences 16 and up.

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### **Considerations for Application:**

Accessibility: Incorporate accommodators and/or adjustments to physical directions, including language regarding seating, standing, and/or moving, as needed.

Social / Emotional: Be mindful of the sensitivity of content/prompts related to personal experiences; avoid required sharing, as needed.

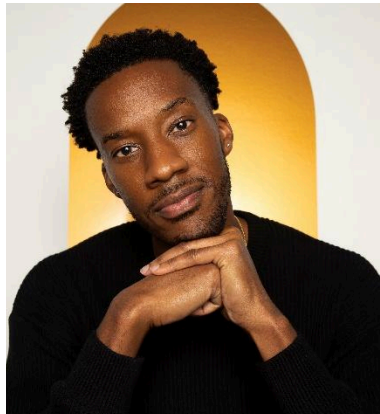
Timing: Lesson plans are written as 1 hour; educators may modify the timing for activities, as needed.

# About the Play

## Synopsis

COVENANT is a haunting new play that pushes the boundaries between myth and reality. Avery is desperate for a way out of her small Georgia town. When her childhood friend Johnny returns after making a name for himself as a blues star, Avery may have found her chance. But Johnny's sudden fame leads to gossip that he made a deal with the devil to attain his newfound musical genius, and before long it becomes clear that he's not the only one in town with a secret. A suspense-filled thriller that delivers one devilish twist after another, COVENANT explores the gripping power of belief and the thin veil between rumor and truth.

## The Playwright



**York Walker** is an LA-based writer originally from Chicago, Illinois. He is currently a member of Lena Waithe's Hillman Grad Mentorship Program. His work includes *The Séance* (Winner of the John Singleton Short Film Competition, 48 Hours...in Harlem), *Covenant* (Roundabout Theatre, Fire This Time Festival, Access Theatre's 4 Flights Up Festival), *White Shoes* (Fire This Time Festival), *Summer Of '63* (The Actors Company Theatre's New TACTics Festival, Actor's Theatre of Louisville's Apprentice Reading Series) and *Of Dreams To Come* (American Conservatory Theatre's New Work Series). York received his MFA in Acting from the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco.

See York Walker talk about his inspiration for writing the play:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJt5eZ6-\\_xU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJt5eZ6-_xU)

## Definition

### **Covenant (noun)**

cov·e·nant | \ 'kəv-nənt

1: A usually formal, solemn, and binding agreement

2: A written agreement or promise usually under seal between two or more parties especially for the performance of some action.

## Setting

*Covenant* is set in a small Georgia town in 1936. It is during the time of The Great Depression. Millions of people were unemployed, and poverty was everywhere. For people in a small, rural town, the dream of finding success and making it big would have felt almost impossible. Georgia was part of the “Bible Belt,” where conservative, evangelical Christianity heavily influenced public and private life.

The characters in the play are African American and Georgia was part of the Jim Crow South where there was legally enforced racial segregation. Daily life involved hard work in a world where there were many restrictions and constant threats of violence. Some people found solace in faith, community, and the church. Others longed for escape. The idea of “making it out” went beyond typical ambition; it could be the difference between life and death.

## Genre: Southern Gothic

*Covenant* is a play in the style of Southern Gothic drama, a sub-genre of Gothic or American Gothic. Southern Gothic is deeper than your typical ghost story; Southern gothic blends spooky, supernatural, or grotesque events with the unique social, historical, and cultural elements of the American South.

**Key Ingredients:** You’ll find deeply flawed characters haunted by their past, old decaying settings that feel alive, and dark family secrets that refuse to stay buried. The line between the real and the supernatural is always blurry.

**Pop Culture Connection:** Think of the unsettling atmosphere in films like Jordan Peele’s “Get Out” or “Us,” where the real-world horror of racism is even scarier than any monster. That’s the kind of vibe Southern Gothic aims for.



Photo by Greg Mooney

## The Legend Behind the Play

### Robert Johnson



York Walker was inspired by the life and legend of Robert Johnson. Robert Johnson was a blues musician born in Mississippi in 1911. He recorded well over 30 songs in his lifetime, many of them now considered “enduring anthems of the blues genre.” Songs such as “Cross Road Blues,” “Love In Vain,” “Hellhound On My Trail,” “I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom,” “Walking Blues,” and “Sweet Home Chicago” inspired people like Elvis, Led Zeppelin, Fleetwood Mac, The Rolling Stones, and Bob Dylan.

Johnson’s music and legendary status have been amplified over time because so little about him is known and what little information we now have took years to uncover. “Myths surrounding his life took over: that he was a country boy turned ladies’ man; that he only achieved his uncanny musical mastery after selling his soul to the devil. Even the tragedy of his death seemed to grow to mythic proportion: being poisoned by a jealous boyfriend then taking three days to expire, even as the legendary talent scout John Hammond was searching him out to perform at Carnegie Hall in New York City.” A character in the movie “Sinners” is also loosely based on him.

### More 1936 fast facts:

#### U.S.

- FDR is re-elected for a second term in a landslide against Republican Alf Landon.
- The Flint Sit-Down Strike begins. United Auto Workers (UAW) members begin a sit-down strike at a General Motors plant in Flint, Michigan.
- Hoover Dam is completed and it began transmitting electricity to Los Angeles.

#### Georgia

- In the 1936 election, Fannin county was the only Georgia county to have a majority of the population vote for Alf Landon, FDR’s opponent. The rest of the state voted for Roosevelt by a massive margin.
- Atlanta native Margaret Mitchell publishes her novel “Gone with the Wind” and it becomes an instant best-seller.



Set model for *Covenant* at the Alliance Theatre.

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1323913439772953&set=pcb.1323913549772942>

## Georgia Standards of Excellence:

### English/Language Arts:

**ELAGSE11-12RL3** Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

**ELAGSE11-12RL5** Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

### Social Studies:

**SSPSP1** Analyze the impact of the social environment on behaviors, and attitudes.

a. Explain phenomena that result from the influence of the social environment on the individual and vice versa: include obedience, social facilitation, social loafing, bystander apathy, conformity such as Asch's experiment, groupthink, group polarization, and deindividuation.

b. Analyze attribution and cognitive dissonance theories pertaining to social judgments and attitudes.

c. Explain the factors that contribute to affiliation and attraction, include: proximity, mere exposure effect, and similarity.

### Fine Arts

**TAHS.3.a:** Analyze the historical, cultural, and social context of a theatrical work.



## Sources

"Covenant // Oct 8–Nov 9, 2025 // Hertz Stage." *Alliance Theatre*, 2025, [www.alliancetheatre.org/production/2025-26/covenant](http://www.alliancetheatre.org/production/2025-26/covenant). Accessed 7 Oct. 2025.

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1323913439772953&set=pcb.1323913549772942>

"Robert Johnson Biography." *Robert Johnson Blues Foundation*, Sony Music Entertainment, 2025, [www.robertjohnsonbluesfoundation.org/biography/](http://www.robertjohnsonbluesfoundation.org/biography/).

Walker, York. *Covenant*. Samuel French, 2024.



Photo by Greg Mooney

# Vocabulary

Term/Phrase	Definition
<b>Southern Gothic</b>	A literary and cultural genre that blends the conventions of Gothic fiction with the unique social, historical, and cultural elements of the American South.
<b>African American Southern Gothic</b>	A literary genre where Black authors use the traditional Southern Gothic mode to explore the unique racial and social realities of the American South, particularly the legacies of slavery and racism.
<b>Breaking Bread</b>	To share a meal with someone, signifying a meaningful social interaction, connection, or even reconciliation.
<b>Fervently</b>	Very enthusiastically or passionately.
<b>Heathen</b>	A disparaging term for a person who does not follow the bible.
<b>Hymn</b>	A religious song or poem of praise to God or a god.
<b>Idolaters</b>	A person who worships idols or images, or one who pays divine honors to people/things that are not God.
<b>Job</b>	<p>Job ("Jōb") is a bible story in which a man is tested by Satan. God mentions Job to Satan saying, "There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil." Satan believes that Job is only righteous because he has had so much good fortune from God. Satan dares God that he can make Job curse God by inflicting suffering on him and God agrees. Job is tormented in many ways but in the end he continues to praise God.</p> <p>It is considered a central text for understanding themes of divine justice, human suffering, and the nature of true faith, which is not dependent on blessings or good circumstances.</p>
<b>Juke Joint</b>	<p>A bar featuring live musicians and typically having an area for dancing. Informal, often unlicensed gathering places for Black communities. They originated in the south before the civil war and became more popular in the Jim Crow era in the south. They offered an escape from the harsh realities of plantation and sharecropping life. The term "juke" likely comes from the Gullah word "juke" or "joog," meaning disorderly or rowdy, reflecting the uninhibited atmosphere of these places. They were instrumental in the creation and growth of Blues music.</p> <p>Juke joints were used as a way for black people to socialize freely during times of slavery and were a source of business/income for when they were freed. They were a place of building community through music, dance, food, and alcohol. However, it caused tension between the black community, one side heavily sacred and the other secular.</p> <p>(<a href="https://www.stagesoffreedom.org/forum/youth-teens/juke-joints-to-black-nightclubs">https://www.stagesoffreedom.org/forum/youth-teens/juke-joints-to-black-nightclubs</a>)</p>
<b>Knockin' on Death's Door</b>	To be likely to die soon.



<b>Moonshine</b>	High-proof liquor, traditionally made or distributed illegally. The name was derived from a tradition of distilling the alcohol at night to avoid detection.
<b>Sacred</b>	Dedicated or set apart for the service or worship of a deity, devoted exclusively to one service or use (as of person or purpose).
<b>Secular</b>	Of or relating to the worldly or temporal; Denoting attitudes, activities, or other things that have no religious or spiritual basis. In reference to the music Johnny plays.
<b>Superstitions</b>	Irrational beliefs or behaviors rooted in fear of the unknown, a desire for good luck, or a belief in magic, rather than scientific reason or logic; in relation or in tandem with religion.
<b>Taboo</b>	A social or religious custom prohibiting or forbidding discussion of a particular practice or forbidding association with a particular person, place, or thing.
<b>Two-bit</b>	Insignificant, cheap, or worthless.

#### GSE:

**ELAGSE11-12RL1** Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

**ELAGSE11-12RL2** Determine two or more themes or central ideas of text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

**ELAGSE11-12RL3** Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

**ELAGSE11-12RL4** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

#### Sources

"Juke Joints to Black Nightclubs." Stages of Freedom, 16 July 2020, [www.stagesoffreedom.org/forum/youth-teens/juke-joints-to-black-nightclubs](http://www.stagesoffreedom.org/forum/youth-teens/juke-joints-to-black-nightclubs). Accessed 25 Sept. 2025.

*Merriam-Webster*. Merriam-Webster, 2025, [www.merriam-webster.com/](http://www.merriam-webster.com/).

*Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, 2025, [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com).

## Characters: Who's Who?

Character	Description
Johnny "Honeycomb" James	The Blues Star. Guitar player, local celebrity, awkward-turned-ladies' man. Has been in love with Avery since he was 12 years old.
Avery	Dreams of seeing the world outside of this town, a woman coming into her own and terrified. The Dreamer.
Violet	Avery's younger sister. Ruthie's best friend, black sheep of the family, loves her older sister Avery fiercely.
Mama	Violet and Avery's mother, full of regret, the only thing holding her world together is her love for Avery and her belief in God. Her faith is her weapon and her shield.
Ruthie	The innocent one, obsessed with love or the idea of it. Violet's best friend.

### ***Reflection Questions:***

1. Based on these descriptions, which character is most intriguing to you, and why?
2. What hints do these descriptions give us about the story and the world of play?

### **GSE:**

**ELAGSE11-12RL3:** Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama

**TAHS.1.c:** Analyze characters' relationships, wants, and objectives in a dramatic text.

### **Source**

Walker, York. *Covenant*. Samuel French, 2024

# Themes and Allusions

## Deals with the Devil

"What you're getting is never worth the risk that comes with it." *Covenant* touches on the topic of selling your soul to the devil and succumbing to your desires and temptations through its characters. Making a deal with the devil was a common fear and topic of stories in the 1800s and early 1900s. In this time the Second Great Awakening and spread of Evangelism made the Christian community much larger and caused a wedge between the secular and sacred, all driven by the fear of the devil. The Book of Job is credited by some as an origin for these stories, informing Christians that Satan's goal is to tempt humans to sin and curse God by forming a negotiation. Usually, stories of these satanic exchanges included a sacrifice that the person holds dear; it is commonly their life or the life of another.

Making a deal with the devil is one the oldest and most popular themes in storytelling.

This theme, also known as a **Faustian bargain**, is all about trading something of immense personal value—like your soul—for something you desperately desire, such as wealth, power, fame, or knowledge. It is a powerful idea that explores ambition, desperation, temptation, and the ultimate consequences of our choices.

### The Original Deal: The Legend of Faust

The most famous story of this kind is about a German scholar named **Dr. Faust**. Bored with his life and frustrated by the limits of human knowledge, Faust makes a pact with a demon named Mephistopheles. In exchange for his soul, Faust gets magical powers and all the worldly pleasures he could ever want for a set number of years.

This classic tale, most famously written by Christopher Marlowe and later by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, became the blueprint for thousands of similar stories. It asks a timeless question: What are you willing to sacrifice to get what you want, and is it worth the price?

## Church and Religious Beliefs vs. Legends and Superstition

Religion, faith, and respectability play a major role in the story of *Covenant*. In 1936, the Church was often the center of the community, especially in a rural small town.

### The Black Church

In the early 1900s, the Black Church was more than part of the community, it was the center of the town. Its principles dictated how everyone should act and behave. If you didn't go to church, you were viewed as outsiders or heathens. Churchgoers, the "upright" citizens of the community, assumed your soul was in danger.

The church was a powerful connector and controller, especially in small African American communities post-emancipation. Those who did not participate in religious worship or activities became pariahs of their communities. The church could withhold supplies or other support to an outsider.

The play's family lives according to what the church says is right, they pray fervently and go to church, but they *also* believe in superstitions, curses, and deals with the devil. They struggle to figure out what is a miracle from God, what is evil work from the devil, and what is just simple human drama.

## Right and Wrong in a Conservative Town - Taboo

Because of the strong influence of Christianity and church there are strict rules for what is considered proper and acceptable behavior. Taboo concepts were tied with religion and considered sacred under the pretense that violating them would mean divine punishment. All the women in *Covenant* had their own "taboo" or sin within the play. Breaking taboos, especially in a highly judgmental Christian community like in the play, will lead to negative repercussions in society including shame/guilt and fear of the Lord's punishment.

The rules often stem from core beliefs about achieving and maintaining purity of mind, body and spirit, respect for the divine, or maintaining social order in a religious community. These include practices that seem outdated and old fashioned by modern standards as well as social "no-nos" we still frown upon today.

- There are taboos of association, which include whether someone spends their time with the right people, Christian churchgoers, or those who did not frequently go to church.
- Association could also involve where and how time is spent. Being seen going into the juke joint, for example, could stain a reputation across the whole town.
- Prayer will fix it. If a person or loved one is sick, prayer is needed. It is thought to be more important than medical attention in some cases.
- During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, homosexuality was often viewed as taboo. It was interpreted as being a sin and was (and still is) sharply criticized.
- Adultery is specifically spoken about in the bible, and is considered a religious taboo.
- Premarital sex is considered a religious taboo.
- Gender roles were very important. Men needed to be breadwinners. Women were expected to find a respectable, responsible husband, marry them and be homemakers.
- Playing, singing, or listening to secular music. This was thought to be a gateway to sin because of the power of music to influence feeling, thoughts, and behavior.

In the play, each character is trapped in some way. These written and unwritten rules, along with rumors, the past, or a character's station in life are weights they carry with them daily. Each person is looking for a way to overcome or break free.

The play explores their desperate attempts to break free and the price of that freedom.

## The Dangers of Secrets and Rumors

In the play, rumors swirl about Johnny early on. He is known as the shy boy returning home as a famous blues musician after 2 years away. The rumor is that he has made a deal with the devil. But as we watch the play, we learn that rumors and gossip are being spread about many people in town and just about everyone has a secret. In the small rural town, these secrets could ruin reputations, families, and maybe even cost a person's life. This exploration of community gossip shows how rumors and secrets can poison

a community and family from the inside out. With gossip, sometimes what people *believe* to be true can be more powerful than the actual truth.

Today many of us love to get the “hot gossip” on people. Reality television is built on our desire to know more about people’s secrets and private lives. Social media has expanded this even more. There is a dark side to this that the play explores in its own way.

**Reflection Questions:**

1. What would a "deal with the devil" look like today? (Think about fame, social media, reality TV, etc.)
2. What is the most dangerous rumor you’ve ever heard or seen spread (in school or online)? How did it affect people?
3. Have you ever spread a rumor? What made you choose to keep it going or even embellish it further?

## Music / The Blues

Music and the blues are woven throughout *Covenant* in many ways - as a means of worship, escape, declaring love, getting attention, and sharing community. It’s one of the backdrops of the story.

### Origins of Blues

- Heavily influenced by antebellum African American spirituals
  - Music was used for enslaved people to be able to remember Bible's teachings
- Most African American communities viewed Blues as the Devil's music because of where it was primarily played (brothels, juke joints) and references to taboo subjects

Blues, while originating primarily from African American spirituals, was viewed by African American communities as the Devil's music. It was often played in places like brothels and juke joints, and made a lot of references to taboo subjects like adultery and alcohol. As James Cone, an American theologian, said, "Blues music contained the same passion and intensity as spirituals, but instead of praising the Christian God, they paid homage to the human experience." You see this in the play with Johnny. The townspeople make assumptions about him because of the music he plays and where he plays it. Some villainize him for it. The first time we see him interacting with Mama, she scorns him because he has a guitar, which would have been associated with that sort of music.

**Design Challenge:**



*Student interpretation of Ruthie in her costume.*

Based on what you know about the play so far, create your own interpretation of part of the story:

- Choose a character and design their costume. Think about their personality and circumstances when choosing color, fabric, and style. OR
- Design your own version of the set. How would it serve inside and outside locations? What role would lighting play?



# Further Exploration:

## Novels and Short Stories

- The Lottery – Shirley Jackson
- The Picture of Dorian Gray – Oscar Wilde
- Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil – John Berendt
- The Devil and Tom Walker – Washington Irving
- A Good Man is Hard to Find – Flannery O'Connor
- A Rose for Emily/Barn Burning – William Faulkner
- Coming of Age in Mississippi – Anne Moody
- Jack Beats the Devil - Zora Neale Hurston
- Deal with the Devil - David Hirt
- Sweat - Zora Neale Hurston
- The Color Purple – Alice Walker

## Music

- The Devil Went Down to Georgia: [The Devil Went Down to Georgia](#)
- Robert Johnson
  - [Cross Road Blues - Robert Johnson \(1936\)](#)
  - [Robert Johnson - Me and the Devil Blues](#)
  - [Hell Hound On My Trail](#)
- Howlin' Wolf
- Bessie Smith

## Movies and TV *(please consult maturity and content ratings first!)*

- Midnight in the Garden of Good or Evil
- Sinners
- Lovecraft Country
- Get Out



Photo by Greg Mooney