

## A Prayer for Owen Meany: An Analysis for Study

### Characters:

*Owen Meany:* Owen Meany is the son of a family in the Granite business. A peculiarly small boy, he is very pale and mouse like. Combined with his short stature is a strange voice that is the result of undeveloped vocal chords trapping his larynx in a scream. Owen believes his voice is from God, and despite his height he has a great command over most, including his parents. Owen has an undaunted faith in God, despite the "unspeakable outrage" that was committed against his family by the Catholics. A brilliant student and supportive friend, Owen earns a scholarship to Gravesend Academy and retains a friendship with John Wheelwright throughout his life. Owen does not believe in accidents and believes that God has given him a mission. He believes that he is going to die and dies a hero. He spends much of his life working up to this awaited moment. His sophistication and appearance earn him the attention of women. However, he chooses to only maintain a relationship with Hester, who he had a crush on since he was a child. All Owen expected in life comes true. He dies a hero, just as he knew he would.

*John Wheelwright:* John never was, nor is he, a sophisticated man. From a matriarchal family, he does not discover who his biological father is until much later in life. As a boy he came to love Dan as his father and trust him for advice in life. His best friend in life is Owen Meany. He has a great trust in Owen. John strives to do everything that Owen does when they are young, but always seems to find himself less than adequate even in adulthood. As an adult, John credits his faith to Owen Meany. A regular church-goer, he resides in Toronto and works as a teacher. A man that still lives in the past, he has an excellent head for dates, but finds himself still mourning over both his mother's and Owen's death.

*Hester Eastman:* Hester was always viewed as inferior to her brothers as a child. This causing her to challenge her parents love for much of her life. As a child she was rather masculine looking, in her teens, however, she became quite sexy in the eyes of John and Owen. Becoming sexually active at a young age, Hester proved to her parents that she could be just as wild as her brothers. Dubbed "Hester the Molester" by her brothers, she adopted the name later in life when becoming a hard rock star. As a young woman, she was quite opposed to the war and very angry, this causing her on occasions to drink too much. She was committed to a relationship with Owen, who she really loved and was willing to marry if it would keep him from going to Vietnam. Owen's death truly damaged Hester emotionally causing much of her anger to become manifested in her music as an adult.

*Tabby Eastman:* Tabitha is a very prideful woman that does not feel she has to justify herself to anyone. Nor, does she allow herself to indulge in self pity. A loving mother of John, she went through a four-year courtship with Dan before marrying. She possesses a tranquil and modest nature, combined with her almost feline like quality. Tabby has a lovely voice and sang as "The Lady in Red" at the Orange Grove dinner club for many years. She has simple tastes to go along with her natural beauty. Shy about acting, she preferred to work as a promoter for Dan's plays rather than act in them. Soon after her marriage to Dan Needham, her unfortunate death came about, a baseball hit by Owen Meany killed her at the age of thirty.

*Dan Needham:* Dan is a tall, gawky man with an egg-shaped face that works in the History Department at Gravesend Academy. A graduate of Harvard, he is quite well educated and possesses an interest in dramatics that spurs the creation of the Gravesend Players. Kind and patient, he fills the role of a loving father for John. Devoted to his adopted

son, he always makes time for the boy. His devotion also extends to his work, where he is gifted and tireless in prompting education of the better boy.

*Owen's Parents:* Mr. Meany owns a granite business in Gravesend and is very protective of his land and business. Eventually he becomes a gravestone maker, opening a monument shop. A pleasant man, though not overly cheerful, he comes across as a man with a sense of humour, but still possesses a cautious nature. This probably rooting from the "unspeakable outrage" that the Catholics committed against him and his family. John comes to view him as rather stupid and outrageous when he discovers that he told his son that he was born of a virgin birth.

Mrs. Meany is a strange woman that is suspected of being retarded. She never leaves the house, and according to Owen, she is allergic to dust. Spending years moving about the windows of the house she practices her self inflicted imprisonment, until she dies after catching on fire when sitting too close to the hearst.

*Rev. Merrill:* Rev. Merrill is the pastor of the Congregational Church that later works at Gravesend Academy in Hurd's Church. He possessed a close relationship with Tabby and was supportive in regards to her voice and the birth of her son. An educated man, he is well liked in the town for his great speaking abilities, despite a slight stutter. Rev. Merrill is full of doubt in his faith, this causes him to be almost detached from it. Still, he is an intense man. Though pale and sullen he has a boyish face and embarrassed smile. His family, however, is rather homely looking. It is revealed that he is in fact John's father.

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## Theme(s):

*Religion and Faith:* Faith is an overarching theme in this book. There is Owen's faith in god, John's faith in Owen, and Rev. Merrill's lack of faith. No matter what he does, Owen remains true to god. He claims he was only not faithful once, this was while selling false draft forms. Owen's faith in god is so strong that it converts John, and it renews Rev. Merrill's faith.

*Death:* Another overarching theme is that of coping with death. In the beginning of the book it is John and Owen coping with the death of Tabby. Neither person completely recovers from the death of John's mother. At the end of the book, John and Hester are forced to deal with the death of Owen. His death hurts both John and Hester beyond measure.

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## Mood/Tone:

The tone of this book is very light, almost conversational. John Wheelwright is sharing a memory of his childhood with the reader. The way John recalls his tale is almost whimsical, making the book a quick and fun read.

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## Plot Summary:

- Learn that John Wheelwright believes in God because of his friendship with Owen Meany
- John's father is unknown
- Owen attends the Episcopal Church, because the Catholic Church has committed an "UNSPEAKABLE OUTRAGE" against his family
- At a Little League game Owen uncharacteristically hits a ball that strikes Tabitha Wheelwright in the temple, killing her
- Tabitha Wheelwright meets Dan Needham on the Boston and Maine
- Dan gives John an armadillo, which John and Owen fall in love with and use in many games
- Owen meets John's cousins at Thanksgiving, and Owen and Hester began to take a liking to each other
- Owen gives John his baseball cards as a sign of trust and love, and John, in turn, gives Owen the armadillo, this following Tabby's death, the armadillo is returned to John without its front claws, this being a symbol of how Owen feels after the death of John's mother
- learn that the adult John is living in Toronto and of his obsession with newspapers and the Iran-Contra Affair
- Tabitha's dressmaker dummy is introduced
- Tabby owns a red dress that she never wears and has a story about why she was never able to return it



- when Owen goes into Tabby's room at night, he becomes convinced that he saw an angel, who in interrupted, thereby leaving him the assigned job of killing John's mother
- Tabby and Dan go through a four year courtship before marrying
- Tabby's funeral is attended
- Owen takes the dressmaker dummy from Dan's apartment following Tabby's death
- Owen and John spend their holidays searching the dorm rooms of Waterhouse Hall, looking at what they might become in later years
- Owen suggests major changes to the Christmas pageant, the most prominent being that he not play the Descending Angel, but the Baby Jesus
- Mr. Morrison drops from his role in *A Christmas Carol*, and Owen claims his part as the Ghost of Christmas Future
- Owen does not want his parents to see him play his role in *A Christmas Carol*, and becomes very upset when he sees his parents in the audience at the Christmas Pageant.
- Owen faints while on stage when looking at Scrooge's gravestone convinced that it was his name that was on the grave
- it is suggested that John attend public school for his Grade Nine year before being admitted to Gravesend Academy, and although Owen receives a full scholarship, he decides to do the same
- Owen and John spend summer driving up and down the strip at Hampton Beach. This being the first time that John feels "grown up."
- Owen begins working for his father as a stonecutter and then later in the quarry
- John and Owen start attending Gravesend Academy
- Owen begins working on *The Grave as The Voice*, writing controversial articles
- Owen and John begin working on "the shot"
- Gravesend Academy's Reverend dies and Rev. Merrill fills his position
- Randolph White is appointed new Headmaster
- on their eighteenth birthdays, John and Owen register for the draft
- Owen begins making fake draft cards and selling them to students at Gravesend Academy
- Owen is given a diary for Christmas by John's grandmother
- White moves morning meeting out of Hurd's Church and into the Main Building
- Owen directly states to John that he believes he is God's instrument
- Owen sinks the shot in under four seconds
- Owen and John discover that the red dress was bought for Tabby to sing in as "The Lady in Red"
- Owen and John are informed by Larry Lish that JFK is "dibbling" with Marilyn Monroe. Owen's lack of belief in this matter prompts Larry to encourage him to confirm the fact with his mother
- Owen's probation causes a complete change in his personality. He comes quiet and stops writing as *The Voice*. These changes prompt the school to demand that he see Dr. Dolder and Rev. Merrill twice a week
- Owen has the basketball team carry Dr. Dolder's Volkswagen Beetle into the Great Hall and place it on the stage
- Larry Lish is caught with false identification that he purchased from Owen, this causing Owen's expulsion from Gravesend Academy
- Owen steals Mary Magdalene and places her in the Great Hall for morning meeting (chapel) with her arms removed
- Owen asks Rev. Merrill to say a prayer for him at morning meeting
- in Owen's diary there is the date and the title he is going to die with. Owen also believes from a dream he has had that he is going to die a hero
- Owen works at replacing the vandalized Mary Magdalene with a granite statue
- Owen goes to Basic Training, however his height puts him at a disadvantage causing him to be deemed "unfit"
- Owen gets his diary and reads John a lengthy explanation about his dream
- Hester becomes very upset that Owen insists on the reality of his dream and that he is going to die, she demands that he leave her apartment
- Owen becomes a Causality Assistance Officer - he delivers the bodies of fallen soldiers
- Owen asks John to the monument shop, where he cuts off top half of his index finger to keep him from having to serve in the Army
- Hester becomes a rock star - Hester the Molester
- Hester offers to marry Owen to keep him from going to Vietnam and refuses to go to his funeral
- John visits Owen's parents following his death where he is told by Mr. Meany that they believe that Owen was of a virgin birth
- Owen made his own gravestone before his death with the date and all titles

- John pays a visit to Rev. Merrill where Owen's voice tells him to check one of the desk drawers. In it there is the baseball that killed Tabby. The Reverend is John's father
- John takes the dresser's dummy in its red dress and arms of Mary Magdalene and places it near Hurd's church. Throwing the baseball through the window he attracts the attention of Rev. Merrill who believes the dummy is Tabby - his faith is restored
- Owen invites John to come and spend some time in Phoenix with him while he is delivering a body
- John and Owen meet the family of the soldier whose body they are returning, and find them to be an angry bunch
- as Owen and John are waiting for their return flight, Owen believes it is his day to die and then sees nuns get off a plane
- Owen dies as he saw in his dream, with Vietnamese children and with John at his side - he is killed by Dick Jarvits. The children are saved thanks to Owen's practice of "the shot."
- adult John is still praying to God to have Owen back

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## Narrative Structure and Changes:

*A Prayer for Owen Meany* is written from a first person point of view. John is an elderly schoolteacher living in Toronto. The story is actually John's memory of his childhood and his childhood friend. While the book is mostly about John and Owen growing up, in the beginning, and, and a few times throughout the book the narrative jumps back to John's current life in Toronto. This change makes the story much more believable, more realistic.

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## Major Conflicts:

*A Prayer for Owen Meany* contained many conflicts. Owen had to fight evil throughout his life, first in the headmaster, and later in the boy who eventually killed him. The conflict of good versus evil is the largest one. This is a story about a champion of good who used his unalterable faith to defeat any evil that challenged his destiny. Owen also has to confront

the evil within himself, which is focused on the death of Tabby.

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## Unusual Attributes:

An unusual attribute about this novel is in the plot. Irving will present the reader with a surprising plot twist, which has been hinted at earlier in the book, and he will quickly assimilate it into the story and tie it to the other subplots.

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## Possible AP Question:

John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, Irving plots good against evil to create various climax' in the book. What writing techniques does he use to further this effect?

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## Links on the Internet:

<http://hometown.aol.com/forestben/irving.htm>

<http://www.corpus-delicti.com/barb/owenmean.html>

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Ithaca/5203/>

<http://www.tiac.net/users/kenmube/books/prayowen.htm>

<http://www.cvu.cssd.k12.vt.us/departments/english/joeg/examprep/meany.htm>

Thanks to Julia Skikavitch for some information links and other things.

Monday, July 02, 2001

Champlain Valley Union High School; Hinesburg, VT



May/June 1997

## John Irving: Mother Jones Magazine Interview

The bestselling novelist is a strong believer in good manners, a semibeliever in religion, and unequivocal in his opinions about abortion. Author John Irving always plays by the rules -- his own.

by Suzanne Herel

Even John Irving's mother has come to expect the lurid elements of her son's work. "Christ! Another dildo?" she exclaimed when presented with an excerpt from the writer's novel-in-progress, *A Widow for One Year*. "I tried to explain to her that there were differences among dildos, and that a dildo from a previous novel and a current novel are not the same," Irving said on the West Coast leg of a recent tour introducing his book (as yet without a publisher) and the upcoming film productions of *The Cider House Rules* and *A Son of the Circus*.

Irving eschews Ernest Hemingway's approach: Write what you know. This conviction has left him free to explore life beyond the pale: *In The World According to Garp*, a group of women cut out their tongues in empathy for a rape victim; in *The Hotel New Hampshire*, a brother and sister enjoy an incestuous relationship; and the pint-sized Christ figure in *A Prayer for Owen Meany* saws off his best friend's trigger finger to make him ineligible to fight in Vietnam.

The 55-year-old New England native is opinionated and passionate about his métiers -- writing and wrestling -- and he uses each to explore the world of rules, manners, and civility, and the consequences of breaking social codes.

**Q:** You view censorship as an oppressive, puritanical practice. Considering the violence in your books, you clearly have a stake in this issue.

**A:** You can't say you're going to ban something in the name of good taste, because then you have directed someone to play the role of good-taste police. We permit bad taste in this country. In fact, we even encourage it -- and reward it in all manner of ways.

Moreover, it's magical thinking to imagine that the reason unspeakable things are being perpetrated by younger and younger people is that they've fallen under the influence of seductive, lascivious, prurient, and violent material in books, films, television.

It seems to me that a great deal of this type of censorship has to do with absolving parents of responsibility -- parents who just plop their kids in front of the television and leave them there hour upon hour.

If you feel so strongly about what's on television, don't have one. If you feel strongly about people having abortions, don't have one. But we are a country that likes to be punitive. We want to restrict. It is a kind of religious fervor run amuck.

**Q:** Are you yourself religious?

**A:** You know, if you asked me one day, I might say, "Well, sometimes I feel a little bit religious." If you asked me another day, I'd just say flat out, "No."

**Q:** But you had a fairly religious upbringing, didn't you?

**A:** I grew up in a family where, through my teenage years, I was expected to go to church on Sunday. It wasn't terribly painful. I thought some of the stories were neat; I liked some of the liturgy and some of the songs. If you're a writer you have some inclination to pay attention. I didn't just tune it out and think about baseball. So, it had an effect on me. I still believe in getting married in churches and baptizing children. I go through those motions. What was even more germane was my study of the history of religion. It was one of the few things in school I was fascinated by.

**Q:** In your memoir "The Imaginary Girlfriend" you write of wrestling: "I've always admired the rule that holds you responsible, if you lift your opponent off the mat, for your opponent's safe return." Does this reflect your desire for a civilized world where there are rules and values?

A: Yeah. I'm a very old-fashioned novelist. I write 19th-century novels, where a lot of rules apply. I believe in plot, in development of character, in the effect of the passage of time, in a good story -- better than something you might find in the newspaper. And I believe a novel should be as complicated and involved as you're capable of making it.

Q: Do you think rules of behavior should apply in the wider world as well?

A: I'm not at all contemporary, not even modern, and the fact that I would be so quaintly attracted to that wrestling rule makes me, I suppose, seem all the more old-fashioned. But I was brought up in a community, in a family that valued such things as good manners, and I still do. I believe in rules of behavior, and I'm quite interested in stories about the consequences of breaking those rules.

Q: The National Women's Political Caucus gave you a Good Guy award for furthering the advancement of women with *The Cider House Rules*. Did you write it intending to make a statement about abortion?

A: You don't want to be ungenerous toward people who give you prizes, but it is never the social or political message that interests me in a novel. I begin with an interest in a relationship, a situation, a character. Before I began *The Cider House Rules*, I thought I wanted to write about a father-son relationship that was closer, more conflicted, and ultimately more loving, than most. Then I began to think of a relationship between an old orphanage director and an unadoptable orphan -- a kid who goes out into the world and fails and keeps coming back, so that the old guy ends up with someone he's got to keep.

In my research I suddenly saw that the doctors in those orphanage hospitals were far more likely to perform abortions than other legitimate doctors, because they knew firsthand what happened to the kids who were left behind. Who else would be sympathetic? Who else would risk his profession to perform this illegal procedure? Not some moron like Newt Gingrich asking for the return of orphanages, but someone who really knew what orphanages were like and how sad the stories involving the kids were.

Q: What are your views on abortion?

A: I have no respect for the right-to-life position, though I have every respect for an individual who says, "I could never have that procedure, I could never see a film or read a book about that procedure." It doesn't bother me if people feel that way. But when you legislate personal belief, you're in violation of freedom of religion. The Catholic Church may espouse its opinion on abortion to the members of its congregation. But they are in violation of separation of church and state when they try to proselytize their abortion politics on people who are not Catholics.

Q: You consider yourself old-fashioned. Yet you support people's right to live their lives without imposition, and you explore social taboos in your books. Where did this multifaceted worldview come from?

A: Ted Seabrooke, my wrestling coach, had a kind of Nietzschean effect on me in terms of not just his estimation of my limited abilities, but his decidedly philosophical stance about how to conduct your life, what you should do to compensate for your limitations. This was essential to me, both as a student -- and not a good one -- and as a wrestler who was not a natural athlete but who had found something he loved.

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# The Order of Morning Prayer

(last section)

## THE SECOND COLLECT, FOR PEACE

**O** GOD, who art the author of peace and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom, Defend us thy humble servants in all assaults of our enemies; that we, surely trusting in thy defence, may not fear the power of any adversaries, through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*



## THE THIRD COLLECT, FOR GRACE

**O** LORD, our heavenly Father, Almighty and everlasting God, who hast safely brought us to the beginning of this day; Defend us in the same with thy mighty power, and grant that this day we fall into no sin, neither run into any kind of danger, but that all our doings may be ordered by thy governance, to do always that is righteous in thy sight, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

*In Quires and Places where they sing, here foiloweth the Anthem.*

*Then these five Prayers following are in be rend here, except when the Litany is read, and then, only the two Last are to be read as they are there placed*



## A PRAYER FOR THE QUEEN'S MAJESTY

**O** LORD our heavenly Father, high and mighty, King of kings, Lord of lords, the only Ruler of princes, who dost from thy throne behold all the dwellers upon earth; Most heartily we beseech thee with thy favour to behold our most gracious Sovereign Lady, Queen *ELIZABETH*, and so replenish her with the grace of thy Holy Spirit, that she may alway incline to thy will, and walk in thy way: Endue her plenteously with heavenly gifts; grant her in health and wealth long to live; strengthen her that she may vanquish and overcome all her enemies; and finally, after this life, she may attain everlasting joy and felicity: through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

## A PRAYER FOR THE ROYAL FAMILY

**A** LMIGHTY God, the fountain of all goodness, we humbly beseech thee to bless *Elizabeth* the Queen Mother, *Philip* Duke of Edinburgh, the Prince of Wales, and all the Royal Family. Endue them with thy Holy Spirit, enrich them with thy heavenly grace; prosper them with all happiness; and bring them to thine everlasting kingdom, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*



## A PRAYER FOR THE CLERGY AND PEOPLE

**A** LMIGHTY and everlasting God, who alone workest great marvels, Send down upon our Bishops, and Curates, and all Congregations committed to their charge, the healthful Spirit of thy grace; and that they may truly please thee, pour upon them the continual dew of thy blessing. Grant this, O Lord, for the honour of our Advocate and Mediator, Jesus Christ. *Amen.*



## A PRAYER OF ST CHRYSOSTOM

**A** LMIGHTY God, who hast given us grace at this time with one accord to make our common supplications unto thee; and dost promise, that when two or three are gathered together in thy Name thou wilt grant their requests: Fulfill now, O Lord, the desires and petitions of thy Servants, as may be most expedient for them; granting us in this world knowledge of thy truth, and in the world to come life everlasting. *Amen.*



## 2 CORINTHIANS 13

**T**HE grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost, be with us all evermore. *Amen.*

*Here endeth the Order of Morning Prayer throughout the Year*

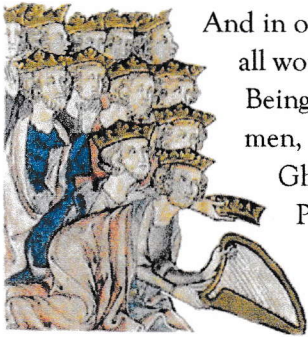
## A GENERAL CONFESSION

*To be said of the whole Congregation after the Minister, all kneeling*

**A**LMIGHTY and most merciful Father; We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders. Spare thou them, O God, which confess their faults. Restore thou them that are penitent; According to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesu our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake; That we may hereafter lead a godly, righteous, and sober life, To the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.

## THE NICENE CREED

I BELIEVE in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, And of all things visible and invisible:



And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten son of God, Begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God, Begotten, not made, Being of one substance with the Father, By whom all things were made: Who for us men, and for our salvation came down from heaven, And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, And was made man, And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, And ascended into heaven, And sitteth on the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead: Whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, The Lord and giver of life, Who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, Who spake by the Prophets. And I believe one Catholick and Apostolick Church. I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins. And I look for the Resurrection of the dead, And the life of the world to come. Amen.



# John Irving A Prayer for Owen Meany

A Guide for Reading and Study

## Chapter One: The Foul Ball

### CHARACTERS

The Wheelwrights (Jim, Tabitha and Harriet)	The Reverend Lewis Merrill Owen Meany	Martha and Alfred Eastman Mr. Chickering
Lydia	The Meany family	

### QUESTIONS

- Setting:** What is the setting of chapter 1? Explain the historical, social, economic, and religious setting as well as simply giving a city name and year.
- What do you make of the references to religions (Catholic, Anglican, Episcopalian, Congregational) in the Chapter? What is Owen's belief? John's? What do we know about the Reverend Mr. Merrill?
- What sort of family does Owen Meany come from? Why does he not consider himself material for Gravesend Academy?
- Discuss John Wheelwright's family and personal history. What search is he involved in from the beginning of the novel? What is the function of all the "history" in the chapter?
- How do people react to Owen Meany? Consider John, his classmates, adults, coaches, and family.
- Point of View:** Explain the complexity of the novel's first-person point of view, including the technique of addressing the reader directly, as on page 18: "As you shall see..."
- Geography:** Be sure you can identify these places and explain why Irving chooses these particular places in chapter 1: the Thames (11), Gravesend (the one in the UK, 11), and Prince Edward Island (18).
- Tone:** Irving is noted for his serio-comic approach in all his works. His humor is almost always tinged with the awful inevitability of tragedy, disappointment, and failure. Note this tone in the treatment of The Foul Ball at the end of the chapter. What do you think Irving has done to heighten the tone?

### VOCABULARY

- |                              |                                    |                                     |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. <i>incongruous</i> (2)    | 6. <i>alewife</i> [fish] (11)      | 11. <i>Federal</i> [design] (16)    |
| 2. <i>translucent</i> (3)    | 7. <i>intrusive</i> [of rock] (12) | 12. <i>ell</i> [of a building] (16) |
| 3. <i>sagamore</i> (7)       | 8. <i>igneous</i> (12)             | 13. <i>imperious</i> (18)           |
| 4. <i>heterodox</i> (8)      | 9. <i>percussive</i> (13)          | 14. <i>litany</i> (22)              |
| 5. <i>juxtaposition</i> (10) | 10. <i>culvert</i> (16)            | 15. <i>creed</i> [recited] (22)     |

### TERMS AND CONCEPTS TO KNOW FROM HISTORY AND RELIGION

Old Testament (1), New Testament (1), *Book of Common Prayer* (1), Congregationalist (1), Episcopalian (1), Anglican (1), Puritan (8), Mrs. Hutchinson (8), the Holy Ghost (8), Pocahontas (11), "high" and "low" church, implied in Owen's remark about "a move upward in church formality" (21), hocus-pocus (21).



## Chapter Two: The Armadillo

### CHARACTERS

The younger Eastmans: Noah, Simon, Hester

### QUESTIONS

9. Consider the title for the chapter. What do you know about the Armadillo, from the first moment that Dan Needham brings it to John until we see it at the end of the Chapter? What significance do we attach to its changes of condition? Do we know about it in current time? What role does the armadillo play in the reconciliation of Owen and John after John's mother's death?
10. John's cousins Noah, Simon, and Hester are important in this chapter. Discuss Hester. What effect does the treatment of Noah and Simon as a "unit" have on the meaning of the story? How does Owen relate to the cousins? What reasons do you think John has for not taking Owen to Sawyer Depot?
11. Dan Needham, who was only vaguely referred to in Chapter One, emerges as a key character in Chapter Two. Discuss the narrator's relationship with Dan, especially in the baseball card-armadillo exchange.
12. Reread the Biblical quote on pages 83-84. What does it contribute to the story? What does the reference to St. Paul add further?
13. Pages 89-93 involve references to key events in American history from 1962 to about 1971. Review each of the events and Owen Meany's reaction to them.
14. What argument is the Reverend Lewis Merrill involved in at the beginning of the chapter?
15. Discuss the sexuality of John's mother and of his cousin Hester (is she like another Hester, or is this an absolute reach?).
16. Characterize Uncle Alfred and Aunt Martha, in terms of their relationships to Tabitha and John.
17. What do we know about the narrator's life in Canada?
18. On page 87, Owen (and the armadillo) says, "GOD HAS TAKEN YOUR MOTHER. MY HANDS WERE THE INSTRUMENTS. GOD HAS TAKEN MY HANDS. I AM GOD'S INSTRUMENT" What?
19. "It makes me ashamed to remember that I was angry with him for taking my armadillo's claws. God knows, Owen gave me more than he ever took from me -- even when you consider that he took my mother.

### VOCABULARY

#### BYZANTINE (37)

- |                   |                               |                                     |
|-------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 16. slattern (39) | 20. sumptuous (46)            | 25. <i>aristocracy</i> (65)         |
| 17. wanton (39)   | 21. base [ <i>adj.</i> ] (47) | 26. red-letter (83)                 |
| 18. garish (39)   | 22. tryst (51)                | 27. articulate [ <i>verb</i> ] (84) |
| 19. palaver (45)  | 23. assignation (51)          | 28. fastidious (88)                 |
|                   | 24. animosity (55)            | 29. sepulchral (88)                 |

### TERMS AND CONCEPTS TO KNOW FROM HISTORY AND RELIGION

proper [part of a church service, as in, "lessons proper"] (83), conversion of St. Paul (83), Jeremiah (83), the concept of the soul (86),



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## Chapter Three: The Angel

### CHARACTERS

The Reverend Lewis Merrill  
Barbara Merrill

The Reverend Dudley Wiggin

Mrs. Hoyt  
(Harry Hoyt)

Instead of Questions: marking a Book

Some people underline in their books, some highlight, some put symbols in margins. However you prefer to do it, marking a book (you own) helps make it *yours*—in several obvious ways. Collecting and sorting “your” passages can help you develop a thesis for an essay or presentation or just serve to help you with recall, insight, and synthesis. Making some passages “yours” helps you be specific in talking about a book. I want you to mark in your books, and I hope it will help you to bring up ideas in class, to develop a sense of the novel as a whole, and to appreciate Irving’s craftsmanship. These are a half dozen of “my” passages from *The Angel*. Look at them *after* you have read the chapter and marked it yourself. Then compare mine with your markings and consider why I might have marked the the passages I did.

- 97 “Good Heavens,” my grandmother said, “it’s so easy to make Wheelwrights feel guilty.”
- 99 It was not the play that interested us -- it was what a lie it was: that Dan was awful to my mother, that he meant her harm. That was fascinating.
- 102 It made him furious when I suggested that anything was an “accident” --- especially anything that had happened to him; on the subject of predestination, Owen Meany would accuse Calvin of bad faith. There were no accidents; there was a reason for that baseball -- just as there was a reason for Owen being small, and a reason for his voice. In Owen’s opinion, he had INTERRUPTED AN ANGEL, he had DISTURBED AN ANGEL AT WORK, he had UPSET THE SCHEME OF THINGS.
- 111 Mr. Merrill was most appealing because he reassured us that doubt was the essence of faith, and not faith’s opposite.
- 119 ... her mother told her that she would wait in line like everyone else. My Aunt Martha—like many Americans—could become quite tyrannical in the defense of democracy.
- 135 When someone you love dies, and you’re not expecting it, you don’t lose her all at once; you lose her in pieces over a long time - the way the mail stops coming, and her scent fades from the pillows and even from the clothes in her closet and drawers.

### VOCABULARY

- |                               |                               |                              |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 30. poignant (96)             | 35. <i>firmament</i> (111)    | 40. <i>vestment</i> (116)    |
| 31. tart (99)                 | 36. <i>adversary</i> (111)    | 41. torpor (118)             |
| 32. <i>preposterous</i> (106) | 37. <i>impediment</i> (113)   | 42. propitious (121)         |
| 33. hapless (109)             | 38. <i>virulent</i> (114)     | 43. cardinal [adj.] (128)    |
| 34. <i>euphemism</i> (111)    | 39. <i>cryptography</i> (114) | 44. <i>benediction</i> (133) |

### TERMS AND CONCEPTS TO KNOW FROM HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY, DRAMA, AND RELIGION

*Gaslight* (96), drawing-room comedy (103), pastor and rector (106), [Reinhold] Niebuhr (106), [Paul] Tillich (106), Union Theological [Seminary] (106), [Søren] Kierkegaard (111), [W. Somerset Maugham (115), Apocrypha (118), Eucharist (134), canon [priest] (134), Epiphany [4th Sunday after] (134), The Beatitudes (135), Nicean Creed (135), the general Confession (135). Know, also, the nine orders of spiritual beings; angels are the lowest.

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## *The Little Lord Jesus*

### CHARACTERS

The Teachers	Pageant actors	Mr. Fish
Mr. Peabody, Mr. Tabulari,	Mary Beth Baird, Harold	Ethel
Mr. Brinker-Smith	Crosby	Germaine

### QUESTIONS

20. What connections do you see among the following threads of plot that Irving weaves in chapter 4: the Christmas pageant, the investigation of the abandoned dormitories, the maids, the death of Sagamore, and Owen's assumption of the roles of both Jesus and the Ghost of the Future?
21. Comment upon John's role as Joseph.
22. What does John find when he returns to Owen Meany's room to retrieve his hat?
23. John tells us (p.186), "Of course, I know now that Owen didn't believe in coincidences. Owen Meany believed that 'coincidence' was a shallow refuge sought by stupid, shallow people who were unable to accept the fact that their lives were shaped by a terrifying and awesome design -- more powerful and unstoppable than *The Flying Yankee*." How does this observation fit the events of the chapter as a whole?
24. Why does Owen Meany reject the help of a voice coach in making his voice more normal and acceptable?
25. Discuss the comic elements of the Christmas pageant so far. There's more to come!
26. What might be the significance of Lydia's condition? Who else is crippled?
27. Irving clubs us over the head with Owen/Jesus, so much so that he can be accused of being too obvious. Is there anything at all subtle or understated about this treatment of Owen?
28. The interlude in Toronto on pp. 173-75 interrupts the setting and chronology of the story. To what purpose? Also consider the references to Catholicism in the chapter.
29. As the concept of *coincidence* is becoming a topic of this novel, come to some conclusion about the role of coincidence in literature. Is it fair to say that in good fiction there is no coincidence? What do you mean?
30. What is the internal and external significance of Owen's declaration on page 151, "FATHER FORGIVE THEM, FOR THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO."
31. What does Irving reveal or suggest by Pastor Merrill's and Owen's behavior at Sagamore's "funeral"?
32. What is the significance of the Meanys' crèche scene?

### WORDS FOR STUDY

46. incoherent (149)	51. crèche (172)	56. mesmerize (196) <i>eponyms</i>
47. divine [v.] (156)	52. quintessential (177)	57. dominion (197)
48. suffer (160)	53. manifest [v.] (177)	58. repellent (197)
49. intrinsic (162)	54. zenith (186)	59. inexorable (197)
50. tableau (172)	55. contemptuous (191)	60. facetious (199) <i>synonymy</i>

### TERMS AND CONCEPTS TO KNOW FROM HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY, DRAMA, AND RELIGION

*A Christmas Carol* (148), the Christian calendar: Pentecost (151) and Advent (159), Parish Meeting and Vestry elections (151), Jesus in the temple (171), *King Lear* (176), the suspension of disbelief (197).



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## Chapter Five: The Ghost of the Future

### CHARACTERS

The people from FATEFUL the baseball game  
the Kenmores; Maureen Early; Larry O'Day

### QUESTIONS

33. John Irving is often compared to Dickens in terms of narrative technique. *Owen Meany* is replete with allusions to *A Christmas Carol*. Apart from the rather too obvious "It's Christmas!" what is there about the Dickens' story that fits the emerging vision we are getting of Owen?
34. John writes, "But I was just a Joseph; I felt that Owen Meany had already chosen me for the only part I could play." What does Irving intend here to reveal about his narrator?
35. On page 212, what unorthodox opinions does Owen Meany express about Jesus Christ?
36. Owen Meany's reaction to the affections of Barb Wiggin are unfortunate. Apart from lurid titillation, why does Irving include this scene?
37. On page 220, Owen reacts to the appearance of his parents at the pageant. How and why? Does the reaction of his parents confirm Owen's actions, or are we left wondering what justifies his response? [see also p. 235]
38. What do we learn about John in the "Toronto break" on pp. 221-226? How does Canon Mackie interpret John's interest in U.S. history?
39. function do Arthur and Amanda Dowling have in this novel? (If you've read *The World According to Garp*, the Dowlings may remind you of other characters.)
40. Now that he has become Christ, Owen takes on the powers of prophesy as The Ghost of the Future. What part of the revealed future does Owen not reveal to John?
41. PAUL OWEN MEANY, JUNIOR
42. At the end of the Chapter, the idea of LUST, [also critical to *Garp*], is reintroduced with John's feelings about Germaine and his desire to search for his father? What does Owen believe about lust (p. 253)?
43. How does John search for his father in this chapter?

### WORDS FOR STUDY

- |                          |                              |                            |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 61. disquieting {201}    | 73. rakish {213}             | 85. iota {220}             |
| 62. penultimate {201}    | 74. tripartite {213}         | 86. icon {220}             |
| 63. uncanny {203}        | 75. triptych {213}           | 87. nave {227}             |
| 64. supernatural {203}   | 76. altarpiece {213}         | 88. recessional [n.] {227} |
| 65. vespers {208}        | 77. harrow {213}             | 89. vestibule {227}        |
| 66. undaunted {209}      | 78. rapt {213}               | 90. sundry {233}           |
| 67. genuflect {210}      | 79. salacious {214}          | 91. cajole {234}           |
| 68. eclectic {210}       | 80. harlot {214}             | 92. acquiescent {235}      |
| 69. deleterious {212}    | 81. ominous {215}            | 93. sanguinary {235}       |
| 70. petulant {212}       | 82. <i>terra firma</i> {216} | 94. reprove [v.] {236}     |
| 71. ecclesiastical {212} | 83. lascivious {216}         | 95. officious {239}        |
| 72. raiment {213}        | 84. sardonic {216}           | 96. tedious {241}          |

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## Chapter Six: The Voice

### CHARACTERS

Ethel  
Archibald Thorndike

Randolph White

### QUESTIONS

The plot of *Owen Meany* develops significantly in this chapter as we see Owen receive the respect of his classmates at Gravesend Academy, the “love” of Hester, and the animosity of the new Headmaster, Randy White.

44. Owen and John’s grandmother have similar tastes in television. Define this taste. How does it relate to Owen’s voice as THE VOICE?
45. Discuss Liberace, and his significance to the concept of narrative distance in the novel (that is, compare the Liberace of the fifties with the Liberace of the eighties).
46. Reread the description of Dan on page 262-63. What does John find most admirable about his stepfather as a teacher?
47. Dan says, “Owen is smart... He’s smarter than even he knows. But he is not worldly.” What is the significance of this comment?
48. How is Hester abused by her family?
49. What specific criticisms of the Catholics and nuns does Owen make in this chapter?
50. Owen’s reaction to *The Ten Commandments* with Charlton Heston is revealing. What does Owen say about miracles (p.272).
51. What is the basis for Owen’s warning John that he probably does not want to find his father?
52. Describe the relationship between John Wheelwright and the Reverend Mrs. Keeling, the Headmistress of the Bishop Strachan School.
53. Allusions to other literary works are increasingly significant in this chapter. Specifically, please discuss allusions to the Bible, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, and *Julius Caesar*.
54. Who is sarcasm master and older woman master? Does this add to or detract from the heroic/religious characterization of him?
55. How do Owen’s reactions (as the VOICE) to the cat mutilations, the drinking issues, and required church attendance begin to shape our views of Owen’s morality?
56. Describe the humor in John’s psychiatric counseling session. Why won’t Owen visit the psychiatrist?
57. What is the major content of the religious lessons taught by the new professor/chaplain Lewis Merrill? Describe Owen’s behavior in class.
58. Randy White represents a significant change in the leadership of Gravesend Academy. How? What is Owen’s reaction to him?
59. What do Owen and John remember of Kennedy’s inauguration day?
60. What warning does Dan Needham give to Owen Meany? How does John express the same warning?
61. In the Toronto sequences, what opinion does John Wheelwright express concerning Ronald Reagan and his administration?



## WORDS FOR STUDY

- |                        |                                 |                                   |
|------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. banality (257)      | 15. narthex (278)               | 29. condescending (292)           |
| 2. acute (258)         | 16. treachery (278)             | 30. prurient (295)                |
| 3. stodgy (258)        | 17. clerical (279)              | 31. boudoir (306)                 |
| 4. decadence (260)     | 18. elocution (280)             | 32. gout (308)                    |
| 5. scathing (260)      | 19. diction (280)               | 33. officiant (308)               |
| 6. androgynous (261)   | 20. articulate [adj] (281)      | 34. nondenominational (308)       |
| 7. kitsch (262)        | 21. sepulcher [John 20.1] (282) | 35. atheistic (309)               |
| 8. marginal (262)      | 22. berate (282)                | 36. vanity press (312)            |
| 9. multifarious (270)  | 23. tilt [pinball] (284)        | 37. head girl [of a school] (323) |
| 10. rancor (271)       | 24. slag (285)                  | 38. benefactor (326)              |
| 11. supplication (271) | 25. caustic (288)               | 39. academic regalia (328)        |
| 12. vicarious (277)    | 26. mordant (288)               | 40. principal [teacher] (330)     |
| 13. sordid (277)       | 27. precocity (289)             | 41. oligarchy (330)               |
| 14. acolyte (278)      | 28. curmudgeon (289)            | 42. parochial (333)               |

## TERMS AND CONCEPTS TO KNOW FROM LITERATURE, MUSIC, TV, AND MOVIES

- |                                               |                                                 |                           |
|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Isaiah 5:20 {good/evil} (308)                 | Greene, <i>The Power and the Glory</i> (309)    | Frost, Robert (325)       |
| Shakespeare, <i>Julius Caesar</i> (284)       | Joyce, <i>Portrait of the Artist...</i> (309)   | Tommy Dorsey (257)        |
| Hardy, <i>Tess of the d'Urbervilles</i> (307) | Lagerkvist, <i>Barabbas</i> (309)               | Liberace (261)            |
| Tolstoy, <i>Anna Karenina</i> (308)           | Dostoevsky, <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i> (309) | "Mack the Knife" (262)    |
| Kerouac (309)                                 | Fitzgerald, <i>The Great Gatsby</i> (320)       | <i>Dark Victory</i> (273) |
| Ginsberg (309)                                |                                                 | Bette Davis (273)         |
|                                               |                                                 | Brahms (278)              |

## TERMS AND CONCEPTS TO KNOW FROM CHRISTIAN RELIGION, AND ANGLICANISM IN PARTICULAR

Palm Sunday (278), the Passion (278), Holy Week (278), Maundy Thursday (281)

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## Chapter Seven: The Dream

### CHARACTERS

Graham McSwiney

Mitzy Lish

Dr. Dolder

### QUESTIONS

62. John says, "If you're God's instrument, Owen, how come you need my help to stuff a basketball?" What's his attitude?
63. Discuss Owen Meany as a college prospect.
64. Why did Owen Meany not drink? What other characters or authors you know make similar comments?
65. What do Owen and John learn at Jerrold's ?
66. What does Graham McSwiney reveal about John's mother?
67. How does McSwiney analyze Owen's voice? Does this give you a hint about how it sounds?
68. Irving brings up the New Year's eves of the early sixties in this chapter. To what purpose?
69. How does Owen propose to discover if Dan is aware of Tabitha's secret life? Do you see Irving ironically commenting upon his own craft?
70. How does John Wheelwright evaluate Reagan's war on drugs?
71. The Lish incidents play an important role in the plot of "The Dream." Discuss that role in terms of anti-Semitism, John Kennedy, morality, Owen's conversation with Mrs. Lish, and Randy White.
72. Define: MADE FOR TELEVISION & IS HE FOR REAL?
73. Describe the Volkswagen incident. Other than providing more reasons that Randy White will want to be rid of Owen, how does the incident further Irving's themes in the novel?
74. Isaiah 5:20 - Woe unto them that call evil good and good evil.
75. How does the statue of Mary Magdalene parallel other parts of the novel?
76. John writes, "I have learned that the consequences of our past actions are always interesting; I have learned to view the present with a forward-looking eye." (407) What does this tell us about his craft in revealing the story? (Where's Wheelwright? Where's Irving?)
77. John writes, "I didn't know how to pray very well then -- I didn't even believe in prayer. If I were given the opportunity to pray for Owen Meany now, I could do a better job of it; knowing what I know now, I might be able to pray hard enough" (p. 415). What effect does Irving want this comment to have on a reader? (Look back on this after you finish the novel.)

### WORDS FOR STUDY

133. shell shock (338)  
134. posh (343)  
135. desultory (357)

136. sociopath (366)  
137. pontificate (372)  
138. voracious (382)

139. subordinate (384)  
140. tumultuous (395)  
141. pandemonium (408)

### GEOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Boston, The Hamptons, Fifth Avenue



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## Chapter Eight: The Finger

### QUESTIONS

In this Chapter, some of the novel's implicit issues become explicit. The Armadillo is clarified (claws and fingers, *n'est-ce pas?*), and we now understand John's comment, "Owen gave me more than he ever took from me," which first appears at the end of Chapter Two. At the same time, the characters are no longer "kids," and the American history that John is relating becomes all the more critical to the content of the story.

78. What is "the *real* bond" that John recognizes as existing between Owen and Hester? How does he feel about it?
79. When did Owen stop doing things for pleasure (373/420) and why?
80. Whom does Charlie Keeling call a "nonpracticing homosexual?" What does this phrase mean?
81. "THAT'S WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN TO YOU AND ME," SAID OWEN Meany. "WE'RE GOING TO BE USED." By now you recognize the statement as another example of Irving's not too subtle foreshadowing, and you can figure it's going to come back. But to this point in the novel, which characters seem most intent on using others, and which are the most "used"?
82. Owen says, "IF YOU ABOLISH THE DRAFT, MOST AMERICANS WILL SIMPLY STOP CARING ABOUT WHAT WE'RE DOING IN OTHER PARTS OF THE WORLD." From today's perspective, is Owen correct in his assessment?
83. What does John identify as the major differences between the way Owen is treated by the faculty at UNH and the way he was treated at Gravesend Academy?
84. Explain John's comment (439), "I was twenty-one and I was still a Joseph; I was a Joseph then, and I'm just a Joseph now." Relate this to his comments about his teaching at Bishop Strachan (see p. 458).
85. "... whenever I did run into him, he looked at me as if he knew something special about me (as if Owen had been talking about me to him, as if I were in Owen's damn dream, or so I imagined)." Who is the "him," and is John correct that John is in Owen's dream? Does this account for the observer's interest?
86. Evaluate Owen's explanation on page 399-400/451 of his faith.
87. Describe Owen's dream (pp. 471-475).
88. "'IT IS DIFFICULT TO DISTINGUISH THE INSURGENT FROM THE FRIENDLY POPULATION.' I couldn't help myself; I said: 'I hope you don't run into that problem in Indiana or Arizona.'" What is the context of the passage, and what is its significance?
89. What job does Owen get in the Army?
90. What does John say he wants to do with his life.(444/502)?
91. What is Owen's gift to John?
92. John's obsession with the news appears pathological, and Katherine Keeling encourages him to stop buying newspapers. John even agrees that a concern with nature would be more "real." What does Irving think? On what do you base your opinion? (See esp. pp. 400-402/451-453.)
93. After reading about black holes, John writes, "And I thought : That is about as far away from Earth as Owen Meany is; that is about as far away from Earth as I would like to be." What does this statement add to your understanding of John?
94. Who are Harry Hoyt and Buzzy Thurston and what roles does Irving give them in the novel?

95. Why does Owen fail to get a combat assignment (think about this)?
96. How has Owen's summer work prepared him for his Army assignment?
97. Why does Irving have us get to know the faculty and activities of Gravesend Academy in such detail and then give us no picture at all of the University of New Hampshire, where John and Owen spend almost the same amount of time?

#### WORDS FOR STUDY

- |                       |                               |                           |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 141. adamant (417)    | 146. indignation (432)        | 151. laudable (445)       |
| 142. arduous (417)    | 147. unman (434)              | 152. zeal (459)           |
| 143. purgatory (417)  | 148. gantry (438)             | 153. tactical (462)       |
| 144. aspiration (418) | 149. cosmic (440)             | 154. verisimilitude (504) |
| 145. undulate (431)   | 150. [curriculum] vitae (455) |                           |

#### TERMS AND CONCEPTS TO KNOW FROM SCIENCE, FROM THE MILITARY AND FROM ACADEMIA

geological time (441); Draft status designations (What are 1-A, 2-S, 4-F) (467+); college degrees (What's a B.A. [484]? An A.B.? an M.S.? an M.A.? an Ll. B.? a Ph.D.? a D.D.? all the others?); *cum laude* (484) is an honors designation; arrange it with the other two in ascending order of honor. What's a Master's thesis (503)? What is the equivalent for a doctoral degree? for a diploma from SPHS?

#### LITERARY WORKS MENTIONED IN THE CHAPTER – WHICH ONES CAN YOU IDENTIFY OR DESCRIBE?

[Laurence Durrell] *The Alexandria Quartet* (434); [Ford Madox Ford] *Parade's End* (488); [Thomas] Hardy, "Hap" (504)



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## Chapter Nine: The Shot

### CHARACTERS

Dominic Poggio  
Eleanor Pribst

Colonel Eiger  
Major Rawls

Dick Jarvits

### QUESTIONS

### CLIMAX AND DÉNOUEMENT

98. How does Irving contrast the fates of Hester and John in "The Shot"?
99. Owen Meany makes two appearances to John after Owen's death. Discuss the circumstances and significance of each appearance.
100. What causes John's hair suddenly to turn white? Why does Irving make the change happen?
101. On pp. 518-519, Owen practically writes John's Master's thesis for him, providing the central thesis on Hardy. What is the thesis and how does it relate to the meaning of *Owen Meany*?
102. Examine the examples of wit on pp. 458-59. Are you as intellectually backward as the girls of Bishop Strachan?
103. How does John react to Dan's plea for him to "forgive and forget—and come home"?
104. In a Toronto passage (527), John says that the "familiar rituals of church and school" are his "greatest comfort." What rituals does the novel suggest he has in mind, and how could they bring "comfort"?
105. Discuss the conflict between John Wheelwright and Eleanor Pribst.
106. Owen's copy of Thomas Aquinas (535) includes a selection on "Demonstration of God's Existence from Motion," the theological argument of the "prime mover." How does this passage support the themes of the novel?
107. What "secret" does Mr. Meany reveal to John about Owen's birth? What has been the reaction of the priests to whom Mr. Meany has told the story? Does that reaction explain Owen's feelings about the Catholics?
108. Owen Meany told the Reverend Mr. Merrill, "I WANT YOU TO SAY A PRAYER FOR ME." What prayers does he say at the funeral? In what sense is the book a prayer?
109. What is John's reaction to the discovery of his true father?
110. Why, really, did Tabitha and John change churches? (549-50)
111. What miracle leads the Reverend Mr. Merrill to a more certain faith?
112. Describe Mrs. Meany's death and its symbolic value.
113. What is the importance of the description on p. 581-582? Remember that John has just told the reader that description is too often overlooked.
114. Discuss the ways in which Owen's death has been foreshadowed.
115. Is it accurate to say that *A Prayer for Owen Meany* is a hopeful novel? If you've read other Irving novels, how would you compare the hope in *Owen Meany* with that in *The World According to Garp* or in *The Hotel New Hampshire*?

## WORDS FOR STUDY

- |                          |                          |                          |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 155. tentativeness (519) | 165. parochial (528)     | 175. committal (568)     |
| 156. tedium (520)        | 166. fiendish (530)      | 176. taps (569)          |
| 157. disabuse (520)      | 167. ludicrous (533)     | 177. insipid (571)       |
| 158. pallid (520)        | 168. careen (543)        | 178. innocuous (571)     |
| 159. dolorous (520)      | 169. transgression (544) | 179. levy (mil) (579)    |
| 160. rueful (520)        | 170. stoic (545)         | 180. indeterminate (582) |
| 161. wit (521)           | 171. remorse (546)       | 181. inscrutable (583)   |
| 162. willfully (527)     | 172. subjective (546)    | 182. unctuous (586)      |
| 163. insufferable (527)  | 173. tribulation (546)   | 183. fetid (596)         |
| 164. provincial (529)    | 174. idealism (557)      | 184. gossamer (614)      |

## TERMS AND CONCEPTS TO KNOW FROM LITERATURE AND PHILOSOPHY

Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (519), Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (520), Euripides, *Medea* (520), Euripides, *The Trojan Women* (520), Bronte, *Wuthering Heights* (522), Richler, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (522), Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (522), Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (523), Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (527), Atwood, *Surfacing* (527), Grass, *Cat and Mouse* (528), Alice Munro (528), Davies, *Tempest Tost* (530), Davies, *Fifth Business* (530), Orwell, *Burmese Days* (530), Orwell, *Animal Farm* (530), Orwell, *1984* (530), Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (534), Findley, *Famous Last Words* (548), Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (548), Trollope, *Barchester Towers* (548), the Prime Mover (535), Hecuba (520), "Mrs. Robinson" (534), St. Thomas Aquinas (535)

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Genesis § The Gospel According to Mark

A Reading Quiz

1. When the LORD asks Cain where Abel is, Cain replies, [A] "In the cool of the Garden" [B] "Am I my brother's keeper?" [C] "I do repent that in my fury I did slay him." [D] "with my mother" [E] "hiding from thy sight."
2. When Jesus is baptized, the "Spirit of God" descends in the form of [A] a dove [B] fire [C] the rainbow [D] lightning [E] an earthquake.
3. The young man with the "coat of many colours" and whose brothers plot to murder him is [A] Cain [B] Esau [C] Jacob [D] Joseph [E] Reuben.
4. The woman who cannot have the man she wants and so accuses him of raping her is [A] Rebekah [B] Potiphar's wife [C] Pharaoh's queen [D] Joseph's sister [E] Jacob's neighbor's wife.
5. The woman in the Garden is tempted to disobey God by [A] the tree of knowledge [B] a bird [C] a serpent [D] Adam [E] her son.
6. The water from the flood lasts on the earth for 150 days, but it actually rains for [A] one week [B] 10 days [C] "a fortnight and a day" [D] 40 days [E] 100 days.
7. The story that accounts for the origin of different languages is that of [A] The Garden of Eden [B] the Land of Nod [C] Joseph and Potiphar's Wife [D] the Tower of Babel [E] the Pharaoh's dream.
8. The son who takes his brother's birthright in exchange for a simple meal and then fools his father into blessing him, thinking he is his brother is [A] Shem [B] Isaac [C] Cain [D] Esau [E] Jacob.
9. The punishments God decrees for Adam and the woman include all the following *EXCEPT* [A] being driven from the Garden [B] having to wear clothes [C] labor pains [D] working for a living [E] changing to a "shape less pleasing."
10. The one thing forbidden to Adam is [A] leaving the Garden [B] seeing God directly [C] eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil [D] interfering with the animals [E] giving names to animals and objects.
11. The man with whom God makes a covenant, declaring himself the God of all the man's descendants is [A] Adam [B] Shem [C] Abraham [D] Joseph [E] Potiphar.
12. The LORD GOD drives Adam and the woman from the Garden [A] in his fury at their disobedience [B] temporarily, until they repent [C] to keep them away from the serpent [D] so that they can find food [E] so that they cannot become immortal like the gods
13. The creation of the earth begins with [A] water [B] fire [C] air [D] clouds [E] pumice.
14. The creation of life follows the order [A] fish, birds, mammals, humans [B] humans, fish, birds, mammals [C] mammals, humans, fish, birds [D] birds, mammals, humans, fish, birds [E] Texans, marmots, aardvarks, ferrets.
15. The "token" of God's promise not to flood the earth again is [A] thunder [B] lightning [C] the rainbow [D] white clouds [E] the dove.

16. Rogers & Hammerstein's musical *Oklahoma* includes a song urging,  
"the farmer and the cowboy should be friends,  
O, the farmer and the cowboy should be friends,  
One man likes to pull a plow,  
The other like to rope a cow,  
But that's no reason why they can't be friends."  
The song recalls the story of [A] Cain and Abel [B] Abraham and Isaac [C] Joseph and the Pharaoh [D] Noah and Ham [E] Burt and Ernie.
17. Once put in jail, Joseph builds a reputation for his [A] great wisdom [B] ability to interpret dreams [C] physical strength [D] devout prayers [E] generosity.
18. On the advice of an angel, Joseph takes Mary and her new baby [A] to "the city of David" [B] and flees into Egypt [C] to the temple for a blessing [D] to Samaria to meet with Martha [E] to a hospital.
19. In the parable of the ten virgins, the five foolish virgins miss the wedding feast because [A] they came unprepared without enough oil for their lamps [B] they offended the bridegroom by showing their impatience [C] they offended the bride by letting their jealousy show [D] they offended God by neglecting to pray [E] they overcharged on their credit cards.
20. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Judas Iscariot identified Jesus to his enemies [A] by kissing him [B] by tricking him into performing a miracle [C] by offering him food and water [D] by pointing in shame from a hiding place [E] with a long speech false of accusation.
21. God tests Abraham's faith by commanding him to [A] return to "the land of his fathers" [B] build the ark of the covenant [C] wrestle with an angel [D] sacrifice his son [E] worship a "graven image."
22. God creates "the woman" from [A] air and dust [B] water and clay [C] Adam's rib or side [D] wind and rain [E] sugar and spice.
23. At the Transfiguration, as Jesus talks with Moses and Elias on the mountain, his disciples see [A] his face turn into a sun and his clothes into light [B] a storm hide the entire mountain from sight [C] "an hundred bushes" with candles under them [D] a tree that burns but is not consumed [E] nothing but a bird.
24. As a symbol that God will provide, Jesus advises his listeners to [A] "pray and fast" [B] command that these stones be made bread" [C] "consider the lilies of the field [D] "wonder and marvel" [E] give thanks that they are not sick.
25. Adam and the woman's first feeling after their disobedience is [A] shame at their nakedness [B] hunger [C] regret [D] anger at their tempter [E] glee.
26. After Judas hangs himself, the chief priests refuse to take back the thirty pieces of silver they had paid Judas to identify Jesus. The money is used [A] to refurbish parts of the temple used for sacrifices [B] bury Jesus [C] bury Judas [D] pay for the "field of blood," a cemetery for the poor [E] to arrest some of Jesus' disciples.



## Electronic Discussion Group posts *A Prayer for Owen Meany*

Help me out:

Those of you who have read or taught John Irving's "A Prayer for Owen Meany" tell me what you or your class did with Owen's reaction to his parents. He talks to Johnny about some "unspeakable outrage" that happened in church and during the Christmas pageant in which he is playing the baby Jesus, he breaks character and yells at his parents, "WHAT DO YOU THINK YOUR DOING HERE?" and proceeds to tell them it is "A SACRILEGE FOR YOU TO BE HERE." My students are all caught up in the Christ imagery that surrounds Owen, and they are troubled by this response on his part. I must admit, I am not totally sure what to make of it either. Give me a few pearls of wisdom to share with my class on this.

On a personal note: Thank you, Tim Averill, for introducing this book to me. I waited two years to teach it so I could be better prepared, and it is paying off -- they are eating the book up!

Bryan Munson  
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705 North Second Street  
Richmond, KY 40475

From: Marcia Tanner <tannerm@okemos.k12.mi.us>  
To: Multiple recipients of list <ap-english@ets.org>  
Date: Tuesday, January 12, 1999 1:40 PM  
Subject: Re: An "Owen Meany" question

A book group I belong to, my students, and I have always grappled with this passage. My current take on it is that if, indeed, Owen believes what his parents told him (about his virgin birth), then their being at the pageant defeats the illusion Owen is attempting to play out as the Christ child -- at least momentarily. His parents had left the Catholic church over the issue, and this seems to be a continuation of attempting to deal with the ramifications.

Why he gets so outraged, out of all proportion to his reactions to anything else in the book, is a great point for discussion.

Notice, I have no real answers. That's one of the things that makes this book so great.

BTW, I am currently having to defend our use of this book in my community. So far, so good. I'll keep everyone posted as this progresses.

Marcia

I have thought about it since posting the note, and my personal take on the Owen outburst is a bit different. I don't like to see him as a Christ image as much as a hero in the classic tradition (thus the virgin birth still works).

I put a little "discussion-prompter" on the board today that said, "Is it just me, or does Owen Meany remind you a lot of Pearl Prynne?" This took us a whole different direction with the church outburst since Owen seems to always get upset with shallowness throughout the novel - even if it is just a TV newscaster talking about Vietnam. His cry in the church then is not unlike Pearl's strange responses to Dimmesdale with the purpose of pushing him toward being honest and understanding that "cheap grace" ain't gonna cut it.

Both of them seem to be irritating voices that tell us truth that is hard to face. Pearl, like Hawthorne, would say, "Be true, be true, be true!" while Owen seems to be saying to his parents, "Look folks, you haven't graced the door of a church in years, so don't walk in here acting all pious unless you really mean it. And if you tell me you are only coming to see your son play Christ in a Christmas pageant, then you are no better than Barb! This isn't a play to watch, it is a sacred event to experience, and unless you plan to truly believe what you want everyone to THINK you believe than get out."

Bryan Munson

Subject:  
Simon Birch  
Date:  
Sun, 13 Sep 1998 08:10:14 -0400  
From:  
averill@massed.net (Timothy C. Averill)  
Reply-To:  
ap-english@ets.org  
To:  
Multiple recipients of list <ap-english@ets.org>

AP Friends-

I saw Simon Birch last night (the first time in years I've seen a new movie on the weekend of release). It's no OWEN MEANY, but it makes reasonable attempts to touch many of the same thematic issues. Sadly, there is not as much praise of doubt as we see in Owen Meany, not does Simon have the moral force that Owen achieves. The young man who plays Simon is cute and precocious, but he lacks the niting wit of Owen and the power of his heroism is diminished by the fact that he's only twelve (and the situation is believable) when it occurs.

The book asks us to believe in a miracle but is told by a delusioned doubter, while the movie asks us to believe in wonderful coincidences and brave actions and is told by a true believer.

Despite all of this, I found the film lovely. Many in the audience were in tears, laughter dominated throughout, and the Christmas pageant was faithfully rendered. After a day of bombardment by Clinton's pitiful peccadilloes, it was refreshing to enter an incredible world of innocence and wonder.

By the way, the last scene of the movie is horribly overwritten. It would be a great AP assignment to have students edit it, leaving only what is essential. We get clubbed over the head with message long after we've got the point.

Humbly submitted,  
Tim Averill, Moderator



**The New York Times**  
ON THE WEB

## A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY By John Irving.

543 pp. New York: William Morrow & Company. \$19.95.

By Alfred Kazin

Our Presidents continue to pour the soothing syrup. But some of our most talented novelists see the political condition of American society as a disaster, the temper of many Americans as correspondingly dangerous. In "A Prayer for Owen Meany" John Irving makes it all too plain, and with positive rage, that in his eyes American society has been a moral disaster since the 1960's. He instances the America that snickered at President Kennedy's amours in the White House, the Vietnam War that sacrificed more than 58,000 of our young men, the moralizing and piety of national leaders who refuse to hinder the traffic in weapons of every kind, to say nothing of a widespread appetite for drugs and the "junk food" of television, which "gives good disaster."

Desperate conditions invite desperate remedies. In "A Prayer for Owen Meany" this takes the form, originating in a town very like Exeter, N.H., and in a school that pleasantly caricatures the old regime at Phillips Exeter Academy, of sainthood - and perhaps something more than that? The center of the book is a little squirt who reminds me, at least, of Truman Capote (outwardly) and has a peculiarly faint voice to match. To be understood, he talks in what Mr. Irving represents as oversized capital letters. Part of his cuteness is that he even writes his diary in LETTERS BIGGER THAN THESE without ever deviating.

In Puritan Massachusetts there was a staunchly independent Congregationalist minister, John Wheelwright, who supported his famously independent sister-in-law, Anne Hutchinson; because of his own mental freedom he was also banished from godly Boston by the ayatollahs of the day. He founded a congregation in Exeter, where John Irving was born and went to school at Phillips

Exeter. I have always been fascinated by the destiny of the Puritans' descendants. I remember with relish the poet John Wheelwright, who was a follower of that overconfident, unfortunate prophet Leon Trotsky and was rumored to don a tuxedo to read his poetry in the Boston streets.

The narrator of "A Prayer for Owen Meany" is another John Wheelwright, also a descendant, but a good deal of a conscious and unapologetic wimp. Although he had half of his right forefinger amputated by Owen Meany so he could stay out of the Vietnam War (more about this later), out of disgust with his native land he emigrated to Toronto, where he teaches English literature in an Anglican academy for young ladies. (He has abandoned his ancestral Congregationalism for the Episcopal Church in America, the Anglican Church in Canada, and his constant companion is the Book of Common Prayer.) The book is as discursive as an undergraduate bull session, and the plot, simplicity itself, raises as many questions as stories of miracles usually do. Owen Meany, the little saint (the scene in which he is left hanging on a coat hook also suggests a "Christ figure"), is unrecognized by all in the school town except his straight man and adoring disciple, the narrator John Wheelwright. Strange occurrences: Owen "accidentally" kills the narrator's mother (more about this later), and not only feels no guilt but manages to persuade the son that it was all foreseen (which means desired) by God. Since the narrator is illegitimate, her death seems necessary to our comprehending the inner perfection of a woman outwardly "immoral." Strange occurrences: Owen foresees the exact day of his death as a martyr. His "inside" knowledge convinces him that he is God's messenger. Because he is so odd-looking and odd-sounding, he acts out the necessary paradox on earth suitable to men



altogether holy within, though he can drink beer to excess and sleeps with the one girl in town unconventional enough to appreciate his stern disapproval of contemporary goings-on. Owen foresees everything in his life; in the startling climax he achieves martyrdom in the most exemplary way. But will this be really understood and appreciated by this damned generation?

What makes John Wheelwright the narrator important to the book is that he reports Owen's - and clearly John Irving's - raging displeasure with such American phenomena (and these are only a few) as Kennedy's inception of the Vietnam disaster; Johnson's helpless expansion of it; teen-age idiots in camouflage uniforms who are stupid with rock music and marijuana; television sought as a solace and acting as a drug. There is much, much else on the burning subject of America's moral failures, political chicanery high and low, the cant common to officialdom, the failure of the churches.

John Wheelwright is a lifelong virgin because of his spiritual fascination with the tiny saint-hero, Owen Meany - who, interestingly, is not a virgin. And then there is the mystery of good in an evil world that lies at the heart of the novel: Owen Meany at the age of 11 killed Wheelwright's mother, a "perfect" woman he adored, when, at bat in a school baseball game, he managed for the first time in his life to get a "decent hit" - a foul ball. This foul smashed into the left temple of the dear woman as she strayed onto the field and turned around to wave to someone in the stands.

I find it preposterous that John Wheelwright not only bears no grudge against the (accidental) killer of his mother but learns to reverence him because Owen is so sure that the death was foreseen, in God's hands. Does she have to die in order to make the point that there is a mystery to this our life that we have to accept if we are to believe in a providence? This may be true in general, but here in New Hampshire the point is so forced that it is repellent. And does Owen Meany ever believe, because his parents (in some confusion) told him, that his was a virgin birth? Is it really a proof of spiritual powers that Owen Meany, while acting in a school production of "A Christmas Carol," should

see on the stage tombstone the exact date not only of Scrooge's death but of his own? Does the corpse of a pet armadillo have to be deprived of its claws, as the Indian founder of the town is pictured without arms, in order to make the point that the world is besotted with weapons? This seems to be an argument not for peace but for impotence, as is the grisly episode, bearing still another symbol, in which John Wheelwright has half his right forefinger amputated by Owen Meany (with a saw used for cutting granite) in order to get him out of the Vietnam War. He gets to Canada anyway, so why not with a whole forefinger?

I do not know the answers. What I do know is that John Irving favors "characters," not character, and has an obvious taste for featuring oddballs, zanies, freaks, "originals." In this novel they remind me not of the lives of saints but of George Price's wonderfully distorted cartoon families, their members forever eyeing one another suspiciously in their own homes. John Wheelwright and Owen Meany love each other almost as much as John Irving loves them, the "good" characters, to the death. Clearly, Mr. Irving has come to such a point in his revulsion from our disorder that he has decided (this is hardly novel in "religious" fiction) that the true saints and even "Christ figures" are the oddballs, and that only such can do anything about this gashed, violent, yet morally torpid society. And unlike us conformist sheep, who are all too comprehensible and classifiable, they test and provoke us not just beyond endurance but beyond our comprehension. Traditional enough! But it is what we do comprehend here that makes for a problem.

The essence of "A Prayer for Owen Meany" - he dies on the date foretold to him, but in a way totally unexpected (I can say that he dies because of the Vietnam War and because of what it did to the American temper) - is that though we cannot understand Owen Meany's life and death in "ordinary," rational terms, we are expected to understand both as a miracle.

My problem is that John Irving's obvious excitement with all this does not translate convincingly as fiction. It is just pushed at us



enthusiastically. There is something much too cute about Owen's conviction that since he can foretell so much he must be God's instrument. It never seems to occur to John Wheelwright, the devoted Anglican in Canada, that his prophet Owen is caricaturing Calvinist predestination in the role of fortuneteller. To believe that everything is in God's hands hardly entitles anyone to believe that everything is determined in advance and that he knows exactly what will happen. This is astrology and denies the principle of free will.

John Irving, whose six previous novels include "The Cider House Rules" and "The World According to Garp," is an abundantly and even joyfully talented storyteller. He is a natural crowd pleaser, not least because his values are simplistic, brilliantly cinematic in the way he positions good against evil. He can be very funny, as in the delicious scene of a student rebellion against a tyrannical headmaster. It is already so perfect for the movies that I laughed as one does only in the movies. But Mr. Irving is terribly in earnest most of the time, politically and sacramentally, with the same easy sense of virtue. The book is as cunningly contrived as the most skillful mystery story - that is the best of it. But there is absolutely no irony.

Our land is in such a state that a miracle man is a necessary symbol of a new kind of thinking among us. Mr. Irving shows considerable skill as scene after scene mounts to its moving climax. But the thinking behind it all seems juvenile, preppy, is much too pleased with itself. There is something appropriate in the fact that so much of the book takes place in and around a New England academy. The heavily emphasized "religious" symbols at the center of the book - the contrast to American aggressiveness offered by the clawlessness of the armadillo, the armlessness of the Indian founder of the town, even John Wheelwright's imbecile joy at being mutilated as still another symbol of his sacrifice of sex to right thinking - all this reminds this long-tried teacher of all the "Christ symbols" his students find in everything and anything they have to read.

I am told everywhere that we are undergoing a religious revival. Maybe so. What I, at least, seem to see is a lot of hopeful language and a frightening,

intolerant fundamentalism when it is not, as it is in official Washington, the most chilling public relations. I shuddered when Mike Wallace, interviewing President Reagan just before he left the White House, addressed him as "a spiritual person." Franz Kafka, who respected religion but like many of us was not altogether certain about what goes on in heaven, said to a Christian admirer in Prague: "He who has faith cannot talk about it. He who has no faith should not talk about it." There is lots and lots of talk about "religion" in this book. John Irving is a talented man and politically more outspoken than most of us, but the talk is on a level with the examples Mr. Irving gives of American superficiality, shoddiness, frivolity.

Flannery O'Connor, one of the few American novelists of my time I am sure will be read well into the next century, was an absolutely, tyrannically believing Roman Catholic who made life difficult even for her parish priest (he told me so) because she disapproved of his literary tastes. In a letter to a friend in 1955, she described a conversation with Mary McCarthy in which Miss McCarthy, who had left the church at 15, said she had come to think of the Holy Ghost "as a symbol and implied that it was a pretty good one." O'Connor: "I then said, in a very shaky voice, 'Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it.' That was all the defense I was capable of but I realize now that this is all I will ever be able to say about it, outside a story, except that it is the center of existence for me; all the rest is expendable."

I have long had the feeling that the passion of that statement has something to do with the steely precision with which Flannery O'Connor indicated her dissatisfaction with human character. Her own character, as she often said, was not so hot. She did not "love" her characters. There are so few "good" ones! But then, she was not a "spiritual person." Casting Doubt on Atheism

"Jesus has always struck me as a perfect victim and a perfect hero," said John Irving, explaining the genesis of his seventh novel, "A Prayer for Owen Meany." The story about a freakishly diminutive self-proclaimed prophet and his effect on the religious belief of his lifelong friend represents "a natural progression" for Mr. Irving.

"Like most teen-agers, for 19 years I sat in church and hated every minute," said the 42-year-old writer during a telephone interview from his home in Grafton, Vt., "but that accumulated time takes a toll or leaves you with images that cast a doubt on one's former atheism."

It was the element of precognition in the Gospels that appealed to his artistic imagination, Mr. Irving said. "One event that always got me was that Jesus told his disciples that they were going to betray him." In the novel, Owen Meany issues a series of prophecies - including one of his death - that find an often ironic fulfillment.

"Owen Meany does seem to possess a kind of moral certainty and acts as one who is in possession of one piece of information that cannot be explained in the natural world," Mr. Irving said. After a lifetime of witness, the novel's narrator comes to believe in God.

"What degree of religious belief I can manage owes as much to personal experience as it does to all those years of conscious and subconscious training within church," Mr. Irving said. "When I am moved to see beyond my usual doubt, when I am moved to something that approaches real faith, it seems to me, I am basing those instincts for belief on personal experience as much I am on any formal religious training."

MICHAEL ANDERSON

Date: March 12, 1989, Sunday, Late City Final Edition  
Section 7; Page 1, Column 3; Book Review Desk  
Byline: By ALFRED KAZIN; Alfred Kazin's most recent book is "A Writer's America: Landscape in Literature."

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Allan Gurganus, Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All...

## John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*

Reviewed by Renny Christopher, English Dept., California State University at Stanislaus

John Irving's novel is also long, 543 pages, perhaps too long for some readers, but I have always been an admirer of Irving's, so I'm willing to follow him for that length, and I especially love this novel. While it is only obliquely "about" the war, nonetheless I find it one of the most moving war novels I've read.

It is narrated by John Wheelwright, descendant of a patrician family in the small New Hampshire town of Gravesend (a stand-in for Exeter). John's best friend was Owen Meany, son of the family that ran a local, unsuccessful, granite quarry. Owen's main peculiarities are his voice--a "permanent scream"--and his sense of destiny. As a child he has a vision of his own gravestone, including the date of his death. Owen is a martyr; the text repeatedly sets him up as a Christ figure.

The narrative moves between John's reminiscences of his childhood and youth with Owen, and his current life in Canada, where he has gone, not as a draft dodger, but to renounce his American citizenship out of protest. In the narrative present, in the scenes in Canada, it becomes clear that he is a maladjusted man, suffering from some sort of PTSD, although he is not a veteran himself. The scenes set in the narrative past drive toward revelation of the event that will ultimately explain both Owen's and John's fates.

The novel explores issues of class--the Wheelwright family semi-adopts the working-class

Owen and makes it possible for him, a brilliant student, to attend Gravesend Academy, where, of course, he gets into trouble. And it is Owen who ends up in the Army, John protected by his deferments first as a college student, then a graduate student. It also deals with issues of faith and unbelief, of war and absurdity.

As usual with Irving, the novel contains some brilliant moments of cultural observation. My favorite is the Madonna-like rock star whose videos always use news footage of the war in Viet Nam.

I do have two reservations about the novel, but both are closely connected to the ending, and I don't want to give it away. One concerns the ultimate explanation for Owen's voice, which is simply dumb and wrong; the other concerns a poor boy who is crazy and violent, and an unfortunate stereotype. But those are my only reservations.

Although Owen's fate is directly connected with the war, he never leaves the U.S. Usually I'm angered by novels and films that make the war be about America vs. itself, rather than about the war as fought in a country called Viet Nam, but this novel doesn't purport to be about the war; rather, it is about America and Americans, and American involvement in the war, which is a different subject. As such, it's a great book, and instead of telling you any more about it, I recommend that you read it.

"THAT FATED BASEBALL" has convinced Owen that he is "GOD'S INSTRUMENT," and he begins to see how he will be used. As the ghost of Christmas Yet to Come in the Gravesend Players' "Christmas Carol" - a production Mr. Irving gives lavish attention to - Owen has a vision of his own name and date of death carved on Scrooge's gravestone. Years later, he has a dream that he believes foretells his death in Vietnam.

After seemingly endless years at a private boys' school and at college - the dull center of the novel seems an elaborate setup for the meticulously wrapped-up ending - John tries futilely to talk Owen out of joining the Army.

Despite a profusion of family and town eccentrics and the shadow of the war in Vietnam, Mr. Irving cannot create a bridge between the world of the novel and our own. With its constant references to literary models, "A Prayer for Owen Meany" often seems a homage to novelists of the past. John writes a master's thesis on Thomas Hardy. He moves to Canada and teaches English, instructing his class about the way fate destroys innocent victims in "Tess of the D'Urbervilles."

Mr. Irving bluntly models John on F. Scott Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway. Resembling the narrator of "The Great Gatsby" - which we also watch John teach - the worshipful narrator of "Owen Meany" tells the story of his larger-than-life friend and drops sweeping comments about America. Bound by his literary world, John's reach does not extend into ours.

Like the symbolic armadillo, the literary references make us too aware that Owen's life is contrived. He does not seem ruled by a fateful God or a chancy universe, but by Mr. Irving. And the crucial question of faith remains sealed within the novel. "Owen Meany" is full of biblical quotations, but the religious discussions carry as much weight as the competitive squabbles between ministers in "Barchester Towers."

Owen himself remains a curiosity, without the power to touch our emotions until the last chapter. There, Mr. Irving is unashamedly sentimental and genuinely moving as John recalls the results of Owen's prophecy. Mr. Irving reaches his 19th-century stride too late.

There is a catch phrase John picks up from Owen; certain things "GIVE YOU THE SHIVERS." "A Prayer for Owen Meany," which asks to be judged on old-fashioned terms, has high-minded hopes and some vitality. It just doesn't give you the shivers.

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Date: March 8, 1989, Wednesday, Late City Final Edition  
Section C; Page 22, Column 3; Cultural Desk Byline: By  
CARYN JAMES Lead: LEAD: A Prayer for Owen Meany  
By John Irving 543 pages. William Morrow & Company.  
\$19.95. Text:



## Books of The Times

## John Irving's 'Owen Meany': Life With Booby Traps

By Caryn James

A Prayer for Owen Meany By John Irving

543 pages. William Morrow &amp; Company. \$19.95.

When the film version of John Irving's "World According to Garp" appeared, people who hoped to be intellectually fashionable sniffed and claimed, "I never liked the book in the first place." Since the huge commercial success of the novel, in 1978, Mr. Irving has often been snobbishly and mistakenly dismissed as merely popular.

He is more than popular. He is a Populist, determined to keep alive the Dickensian tradition that revels in colorful set pieces, blubbers with sentimentality, finds depth in cartoonish characters and teaches moral lessons. You do not have to claim that Mr. Irving matches Dickens's greatness - a silly comparison - to credit him with the serious ambition of carrying the 19th-century novel into our literary age.

More than any of his novels since "Garp," more than the raucous but shallow "Hotel New Hampshire" and the somber "Cider House Rules," "A Prayer for Owen Meany" embraces those 19th-century qualities. Mr. Irving's seventh novel does not have the astounding narrative power and playfulness of "Garp." It takes its own eccentric approach to Mr. Irving's constant theme: life is miraculous, fraught with meaning and loaded with booby traps.

The story follows Owen Meany's marginal growth from a boy to a man. At age 11, he is the size of a 5-year-old. As an adult, he is barely 5 feet tall. Throughout his life, he keeps his unnaturally high-pitched voice, its squeals suggested by the capital letters Mr. Irving uses even for Owen's most trivial dialogue: "TURN ON THE LIGHT!" said Owen Meany."

Owen's story is told, in flashbacks to the 1950's and 60's, by his nondescript best friend, John Wheelwright. Through him, we see Owen as a hero,

a martyr, a prophet and a Christ-figure. Through John's own struggle with belief, Mr. Irving frames the everlasting questions that haunt his novel. Does fate or chance control one's life? Is there a God who orders even the tragedies of the world?

The novel is not a religious argument; it is John's prayer of remembrance for Owen Meany, who helped him believe in God.

Owen and John grow up in the town of Gravesend, N.H., where the poor Meanys own a granite mine. Owen virtually cut his teeth on gravestones. The Wheelwrights are the town's aristocrats, even though John is illegitimate.

Beautiful and kind, Tabby Wheelwright is adored by both her son and Owen. It is a double tragedy when, in the novel's first chapter, Owen steps up to bat at a Little League game, and hits a foul ball that strikes and kills his best friend's mother. In Gravesend, symbols take the place of the natural irrational anger that would surely be found in real life. The 11-year-old Owen expresses his sorrow by giving John his treasured baseball cards. And prompted by his newly married, newly widowed stepfather, John returns them along with a stuffed armadillo that both boys love.

But "Owen Meany" does not become treachery, because Mr. Irving maintains his sense of the ridiculous. Owen plays the Christ Child in the Episcopal Church's Christmas pageant, and turns Him into a surly, manipulative mirror image of Owen himself. When he spots his hapless parents in the congregation, Owen sits up in his manger. "WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING HERE?" the angry Lord Jesus screamed."

but persuading you, emotionally and psychologically, to believe something." Maintaining a Certain Distance

But "A Prayer for Owen Meany" is also a political book, or, at least, it is full of political commentary by its characters and has been interpreted by some critics as a despairing satire on American life. If Mr. Irving stresses the entertainment value of his work, what is one to make of Owen Meany's claim that America is "morally exhausted," not only by the Vietnam War but also by the junk-food culture, drugs and music videos and such other problems as the Iran-contra affair and the culture of greed? Isn't that political commentary? Mr. Irving responds that the relationship between his novel and his beliefs is a complicated one. He shares a good deal of Owen Meany's and John Wheelwright's distress, whose causes lie in the turmoil of the 1960's. "I wanted in this novel to create two victims of the Vietnam period in our history," Mr. Irving said, referring to the novel's two major figures.

But the author makes two other points in this regard. First, he maintains a distance from their distress just as he did toward protests during the Vietnam War. He said he was uncomfortable with the antiwar fervor of that period, in part because he suspected that some of the protesters were "among the most grossly misinformed people in this country."

The second point is that Mr. Irving says he wants above all else to fashion good stories. While he is attracted to the arguments of some of his characters, Mr. Irving in "Owen Meany" lampoons them, treats them comically, uses them as material for a humorous tale of human foibles, rather than as elements in a political lesson. 'I Am a Comic Novelist'

In the end, Mr. Irving's principal self-definition is summed up in the line, : "I am a comic novelist." His major preoccupation, his most time-consuming task, he said, is fashioning his characters and devising his plots, making sure that what appear to be throwaway details early on in the book pop up again as crucial elements of the story later on.

"I'm not a political commentator," he said. "A social commentator? You bet. A moralist? Sure. But I would like to be judged by how well I set up the shop.

"I have a very simple formula," he said, "which is that you've got to be more interested on page 320 than on page 32." One of the techniques involves his use of oddball characters.

"There is no question but that an event of some eccentricity, a character of some 'on the edge or beyond the edge' quality is going to get your attention more than an everyman," he said.

"It is my deliberate decision to create someone who is capable of moving you and then hurting him," Mr. Irving said. "It's an honorable 19th-century technique."

And he makes no secret that he strives for big novels in the 19th-century manner - eventful, heavily peopled stories of the sort, he argues, that you don't see much anymore.

"These days," he said, "I see most novels 120 pages long printed in type large enough to be for the blind, and I don't think those are novels. I don't think there's enough story in them or enough character or enough intricacy to hold my attention for the first 20 pages, much less to drag myself through all 120 pages."

"Let no one forget," he said, "that when I say I'm only a storyteller, I'm not being humble."



**The New York Times**  
ON THE WEB

## A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY By John Irving.

543 pp. New York: William Morrow & Company. \$19.95.

By Richard Bernstein

The first thing to know about John Irving as his new book, "A Prayer for Owen Meany," climbs the best-seller charts, is that, as he puts it, "I am not John Wheelwright."

John Wheelwright is the first-person narrator of "Owen Meany," whose namesake, in turn, is the diminutive, Christlike hero of Mr. Irving's novel of religious revelation in a small New England town. John Wheelwright is a man who, in revulsion at the supposed moral bankruptcy of America, goes to Toronto -where Mr. Irving lives part of the year.

But despite the similarities of name and geography, the creator of the fictional John calls him a "permanent crank" who lives "a kind of champagne cork disgruntlement at every political activity of the United States." Mr. Irving dismisses assumptions that the character is his own polemical mouthpiece.

"I wouldn't be playing fair if I did not admit to sharing some of his opinions emotionally, but the point about Johnny Wheelwright is that he has no distance; he has no perspective," Mr. Irving said. "He is puerile. His sense of political outrage is strictly emotional." Creations 'on the Edge'

There are other things to know about Mr. Irving, who, since "The World According to Garp" appeared just over a decade ago, has enjoyed about as much champagne-cork celebrity as any novelist in the country. He is 47 years old, beginning to gray but compact and muscled like the college wrestler he used to be. During a recent interview, he reminisced about his religious childhood in New Hampshire, talked about his love of fictional creations who are "on the edge or beyond the edge," and described himself as a storyteller in the tradition of the 19th century.

"I've read about myself that I am not to be taken seriously because I am a shameless entertainer, a crowd pleaser," he said. "You bet. I am. My feeling is I'm not going to get you to believe anything if I can't get you to finish the book."

"A Prayer for Owen Meany" tells a religious story, though a religious story set against the twin backgrounds of the Vietnam War and an identifiably Irvingesque landscape of oddball characters and grotesque occurrences. The most fundamental thing that happens in its 543 pages is John Wheelwright's religious conversion, which comes about because of the influence of his tiny friend Owen Meany, whose physical stature and high-pitched voice might otherwise make him unlikely as an inspirer of spiritual beliefs. Intermittent Faith

"I've always asked myself what would be the magnitude of the miracle that could convince me of religious faith," Mr. Irving said, identifying the kernel of philosophical curiosity that generated this latest book. He said that as a regular churchgoer during his youth, he himself had numerous religious doubts and "an on-again, off-again faith," the very closeness of the experience keeping him from seriously considering a religious character.

"And yet," he said, "so much accumulated churchgoing had an effect, even if, when I was a teen-ager, the pompousness of it, the self-righteousness of it irritated me. I have to say that some of the people who made the greatest impression on me were ministers. They seemed intelligent, compassionate, kind. They were articulate. For someone who was interested in telling stories, they were among my first contacts with seizing someone's attention, telling a story and convincing you, not on intellectual grounds but



## A Prayer for Owen Meany: What some other people thought

Like all of Irving's novels, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* seems both more and less than one book. It cannot decide whether to be a folksy Bildungsroman set in New Hampshire, a full-scale Christian/Freudian allegory, or a commentary on American politics. The reminiscences of Owen and John's childhood are so long and so lacking in comic or psychological punch that one would be hard-pressed to tolerate them from a friend. From the unappealing first-person narrator they are unspeakably tedious. And since that narrator is quite obviously Irving's shadow, we might lay a certain self-indulgence at the author's door. But, most irritatingly, the tone ... oscillates between 1960s ranting and a sentimentalized Proust; its 543 pages have all the subtlety of a wholegrain madeleine.

*The Times Literary Supplement*

Irving is particularly good at rendering the dynamics of things—he has a Dickensian ability to juxtapose and animate unpromising objects into strangely perverse, potentially ludicrous or malign life. ... The most attractive parts of this book ... don't ask to be considered in terms of irony or sentimentality; they may be appreciated and enjoyed for the humorously solid things they are. ... As for the novel's religious message, it doesn't have one except that you'd better believe that this wonderful little Owen guy was indeed the instrument of God, since our narrator does. ... [One can compare Irving], if not to [Dickens](#), at least to the Twain of *Tom Sawyer*, or to Booth Tarkington, or to Salinger, all writers of boy's books, and no bad company in which to find oneself.

*The New Republic*

Roomy, intelligent, exhilarating and darkly comic ... Dickensian in scope .... Quite stunning and very ambitious.

*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

Diminutive Owen Meany, the social outcast with the high, pinched voice, has an enormous influence on his friend Johnny Wheelwright—not least because the only baseball Owen ever hits causes the death of Johnny's mother. But as Johnny claims, "Owen gave me more than he ever took from me. . . . What did he ever say that wasn't right?" Spookily prescient, convinced that he is an instrument of God, Owen intimidates child and adult alike. Why Johnny "is a Christian because of Owen Meany" is the novel's central mystery but not its only one: Who, for instance, was Johnny's father? Untangling these knots, the adult Johnny pauses to consider his religious convictions and distaste of American politics in passages that are neither especially persuasive nor effectively integrated into the book. And though Owen is a compelling presence, his power over others is not entirely convincing. Still, readers will be drawn in by the story of the boys' friendship and by the desire to see some resolution to Johnny's mysteries.

*Library Journal*

How interesting does John Irving make this material? Nowhere do we find the power, vision, or humor that would merit a comparison with [Dickens](#). The Christian theme is obviously central to the novel, yet one is left in some doubt how it is to be taken. *A Prayer for Owen Meany* is steeped in the ritual and practice of mainline Protestantism. ... Yet what the novel conveys is a sense of religiosity, rather than religion, of the miraculous rather than the spiritual. It is hard to give imaginative credence to Owen's bizarre conviction without more to go on than the narrator's reporting of his words and actions, especially since the narrator himself does not inspire total confidence. Too often the Christian elements seem merely another aspect of the novel's sensationalism.

*The New York Review of Books*



The essence of *A Prayer for Owen Meany* ... is that though we cannot understand Owen Meany's life and death in 'ordinary,' rational terms, we are expected to understand both as a miracle. My problem is that John Irving's obvious excitement with all this does not translate convincingly as fiction. It is just pushed at us enthusiastically. ... Our land is in such a state that a miracle man is a necessary symbol of a new kind of thinking among us. Mr Irving shows considerable skill as scene after scene mounts to its moving climax. But the thinking behind it all seems juvenile, preppy, is much too pleased with itself. There is something appropriate in the fact that so much of the book takes place in and around a New England academy. ... There is lots and lots of talk about 'religion' in this book. John Irving is a talented man and politically more outspoken than most of us, but the talk is on a level with the examples Mr Irving gives of American superficiality, shoddiness, frivolity.

*The New York Times Book Review*

Irving's inventive stamina and virtuosity scarcely disguise his indignation about the way of the world, particularly about the manner in which US foreign policy has been conducted in the past 25 years. ... Despite its theological proppings, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* is a fable of political predestination. As usual, Irving delivers a boisterous cast, a spirited story line and a quality of prose that is frequently underestimated even by his admirers. On the other hand, the novel invites trespass by symbol hunters. ... To get lost in critical rummage would be to miss the point. Irving's litany of error and folly may strike some as too righteous; but it is effective.

*Time*

Irving's storytelling skills have gone seriously astray in this contrived, preachy, tedious tale of the eponymous Owen Meany, a latter-day prophet and Christ-like figure who dies a martyr after having inspired true Christian belief in the narrator, Johnny Wheelwright. The boys grow up close friends in a small New Hampshire town, where Owen's loutish parents own a quarry and where the fatherless Johnny, whose beloved mother never reveals the secret of his paternity, becomes an orphan at age 11 when a foul ball hit by Owen in a Little League game strikes his mother on the head, killing her instantly. The tragedy notwithstanding, Owen and Johnny cleave to a friendship sealed when Owen uses desperate means to keep Johnny from going to Vietnam, and brought to its apotheosis when Johnny is present at the death Owen has seen prefigured in a vision. Despite the overworked theme of a boy's best friend causing his mother's injury or death (one thinks immediately of [Robertson Davies](#) and Nancy Willard), the plot might have been workable had not Irving made Owen a caricature: Owen is, all his life, so tiny he can be lifted with one hand; he is "mortally cute", and he has a "cartoon voice" because he must shout through his nose, which Irving conveys by printing all of Owen's dialogue in capital letters, an irritating device that immediately sets the reader's teeth on edge. Then too, the author's portentously dramatic foreshadowing, which has worked well in his previous books, is here sadly overdone and excessively melodramatic. On the plus side, Irving is convincing in his appraisal of the tragedy of Vietnam and in his religious philosophizing, in which he distinguishes the true elements of faith. But that is not enough to save the meandering narrative. Owen is not the only one to hit a foul ball in this novel, which is too "mortally cute" for its own good.

*Publishers Weekly*

## amazon.com

A Prayer for Owen Meany  
by John Irving

Paperback (May 1997)

Ballantine Books (Trd Pap); ISBN: 0345417976 ; Dimensions (in inches): 1.32 x 8.29 x 5.48

Amazon.com Sales Rank: 290

Avg. Customer Review: **5 stars** Number of Reviews: 275

### Book Description

Owen Meany, the only child of a New Hampshire granite quarrier, believes he is God's instrument; he is. This is John Irving's most comic novel, yet Owen Meany is Mr. Irving's most heartbreaking character.

"Roomy, intelligent, exhilarating and darkly comic...Dickensian in scope....Quite stunning and very ambitious."

LOS ANGELES TIMES BOOK REVIEW

"John Irving is an abundantly and even joyfully talented storyteller."

THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

### Synopsis

In the summer of 1953, during a Little League baseball game, 11-year-old Owen Meany hits a foul ball that kills his best friend's mother. What happens to him after that fateful day makes A Prayer for Owen Meany extraordinary, terrifying, and unforgettable. HC: Morrow. --

### From the Publisher

I have been a voracious reader since childhood, and while I've read and loved many, many books, I can honestly say that A Prayer for Owen Meany is my all-time favorite! It is such an extraordinarily funny, moving and heartbreaking story and then ending is the best and most satisfying one I've ever read. The highlight of my first year working for Ballantine Books was attending a reading John Irving gave for the paperback publication. Owen Meany has a very memorable voice when you read the book, so you can imagine how exciting it was for me to hear my favorite author read my favorite book and DO THE VOICE OF OWEN MEANY!

M. Coolman

Ballantine Publicity

### Customer Comments

Average Customer Review: **5** Number of Reviews: 275

A reader from Cleveland, Ohio , August 29, 1998

If it wasn't for my bookclub - I would never have read this!

If you can get through the first two chapters without giving up, and through the religious stuff, this book is first rate. I really disliked the capitalized letters in which Owen spoke; however, THAT is Owen. Bigger than life with a lot of insights. The last chapter or so tied all the loose ends together. Great read. I have passed the book on!!

A reader from St. Louis , August 29, 1998

Life-Changing

I read this book once a year for personal therapy. I recommend it to people who feel they have lost faith in something, no matter what it is. The characters in this book are drawn with beauty and dignity. You will never look at an armadillo, stuffed, mounted, living, or otherwise, again, without thinking of Owen Meany.

A reader from Buffalo, New York , August 29, 1998

You'll laugh, cry, and question faith & destiny all at once

"A Prayer for Owen Meany" was a book I thoroughly enjoyed, down to the last letter. It is a thoroughly feasible story about an amazing friendship, faith in God and in oneself, and the inevitable power of destiny. It is a story that will leave you wishing you knew Owen personally, and had experienced this fascinating tale firsthand. "A Prayer for Owen Meany" is truly a remarkable, once-in-a-lifetime read.

A reader from Atlanta, GA , August 27, 1998

THE ABSOLUTE BEST BOOK I'VE EVER READ!!!!

Read it and drift through childhood, adolescence and early adulthood with Owen and Johnny. These two characters are Irving's best. Without question Meany is his most influential. I keep asking myself, "What would Owen Meany think about that...", as I encounter everyday struggles in my own maturity.



A reader from Boston , August 26, 1998 <sup>3</sup>

A good read but Irving does go on, and on.....

I am swimming against the tide, but I lost interest in this book in several places, read two other books while reading this one. This is a Dickens-like book; not exactly concise. I wonder if the editor was on vacation. Also, I have a feeling men rate this book higher than women. On the plus side, I will not easily forget Owen Meany, great character development (though protagonist John Wheelwright is certainly a less than memorable character) and I laughed out loud a lot.

A reader from Chicago , August 25, 1998

Just read it.

This will easily make your top 5 All-time Best Book list. John Irving has an insight for humanity, love and life, like no one I've ever read. As the others have alluded, I'm not sure what emotion you will exude harder: joy or sadness.

One of the few books you should own in hardcover.

A reader from Pittsburgh , August 13, 1998 <sup>3</sup>

dissappointing

For the most part of the book I enjoyed it thoroughly until I reached the most disappointing ending that there ever could be to a book. It was bland and totally unrealistic, Irving did such a wonderful job with the rest of the book only to leave me with a bitter taste for the book in my mouth at the end of my reading.

A reader from Lincoln, Nebraska , August 3, 1998 <sup>4</sup>

We all know Owen.

I made the strangest discovery after finishing the book: Each important person in my life has just a little bit of Owen's personality in them. I think he truly does represent the best and worst in all of us. I wonder if I'm not the only one who got that impression.

Oliver Phillips (ophill@ukans.edu) from Lawrence, Kansas , July 12, 1998 <sup>3</sup>

An uneven read.

Reading "A Prayer for Owen Meany" is like driving on a highway through interesting landscape but where one meets rough paving, unexpected potholes, and too many signs along the side of the road telling what is ahead. Foreshadowing ought to be rather more subtle. And does Irving mean his determinist, omen-ridden religion, or is this a writer's pose?

Tom.Coates@btinternet.com from London , July 8, 1998 <sup>3</sup>

I felt a little let down. Basically.

It was OK - the best book of my best friend - but I didn't like it. Basically. The whole thing rests on about 5 pages

at the end -the whole damn book. The end should have been more significant. That's all.

racmurphy@msn.com from Tennessee , July 8, 1998

Irving wades in the theological cesspool

There is something about *A Prayer for Owen Meany* that resembles a lake on a hot summer day--at once inviting, rewarding--as long as you don't look too closely at what's on the bottom. Undoubtedly Irving hits the high waters with his characterizations, most notably with Dan, Tabby, and, of course, the popular Owen. Other cast members, while perhaps not as engaging, approach Thackerayan caricature, which in itself is not a bad feat. Most alarming to me is the theological mess that lies both textually and contextually. Is this novel representing authentic Christianity to readers? I hope not. Practically all of the doctrine that is purported here cannot be reconciled to the Bible, except perhaps a somewhat twisted Calvinism. However critical I might appear of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, this is a nice piece of fiction. Perhaps if Irving had not dumped on Owen and Co. the title of "Christian," I would have liked the novel better. If anyone is interested in discussing the theological implications of Irving with me, especially if you are a reformed thinker, I'd be happy to hear from you.

Luck87 @AOL.com Chuck Lang, Sun city, AZ from Sun City, AZ , June 23, 1998 <sup>4</sup>

Dull, exciting, dull, exciting.

There are three outstanding scenes in *A Prayer For Owen Meany*. There is the manger scene of the annual Christmas pageant of Gravesend Academy.. there is the "kidnaping" of the school shrink's VW, and there is the graduation convocation of Owen Meany's graduating class, for which Owen was scheduled to be valedictorian. The first two are uproariously funny , the third poignant and sad--enough so to make a cynical reviewer almost cry.

This is not to suggest the rest of John Irving's work is not worthy of pursuit. It is, if for no other reason than that Shaw is a superb writer. Stodgy, perhaps; given to expounding on unnecessary detail, often; confusing with frequently shifting flashbacks, certainly. But here is a character-driven story, and no character is so minor that he/she escapes Shaw's detailed description. He has keen insights into his characters, from a Little League baseball manager crying at a funeral, to an insensitive police chief ignoring human suffering in his search for a missing baseball, through a rural red neck prowling an airport with bayonet and hand grenade.

The novel follows the growth and maturation of two 10-year-olds through primary, high school, college and beyond. This does not make for exciting reading. The pages tend to resemble the Good Grey Times. There is very little action, few thrills, no stalking ax-murderers. There is abundant political comment--on Reagan, on



Kennedy, on Lyndon Johnson, on Viet Nam and Korea. Shaw's characters even voice opinions on movies of the times, television programming, mandatory attendance at Sunday church services, and the protagonist's frustration with news and newspapers. Hardly the stuff of a Dean Koontz horror tale or a Robert Parker chronicle of a Spenser/Hawk adventure, or a John Grisham courtroom thriller.

Here is a story of love and friendship, of good and evil, of coming of age. Here is a novel with a final sentence that leaves the reader with a heart-rendering jolt. Twice during the reading of Owen Meany this reviewer didn't want to finish the book. The first time (actually this happened several times) I simply wanted to quit out of sheer boredom. The other time--this happened during the final 150 pages--I simply wanted the author to go on and on with these magnificent characters.

fwhouts@ucdavis.edu from Davis, CA , June 15, 1998 **3**  
he's a fake

John Irving will make you cry and laugh and all those good things that any novel will do, but the grand finale of this gig makes you wonder why you even bothered. You have a virgin narrator taking communion constantly in Canada--an ex-patriot making crass comments about Iran-Contra and Vietnam that have little to no spiritual permutations. This could have been done in 100 less pages with a better narrator. Then, it would get my 5 stars.

A reader from Alberta, Canada , June 12, 1998 **4**  
Finely Plotted, Fully Characterized, Faithfully Rendered  
I am reluctant to add more praise for Owen Meany, seeing how much already exists in the list of 'reviews', but I will say I agree with most of it. One criticism, however. If I remember right, John Irving had come to live in Canada around the time he wrote/published this novel and it shows up in a somewhat annoying way in the character of John the narrator. That is, John Wheelwright the English teacher becomes a vehicle for John Irving to ingratiate himself into the company of Canadian novelists, which is made apparent by the repeated mention of prominent Canadian authors. Sure, it's defensible to say that the narrator is teaching in a Canadian school that demands its CanLit be taught, but Irving overdoes it a bit with the homage to Atwood, Munro, Richler, Findley and, especially, Robertson Davies. I recall one reviewer complaining about the narrator's anti-American rants getting in the way of the story. This didn't bother me near as much as the homage to Canadian authors. The narrator's ranting makes sense given the American experiences of the characters, but the Canadian author name-dropping certainly got in the way for me (despite the narrator's occupation). But I'm making a big deal of a small point.

The fact is, I loved the story and the characters. It's rare to read a book that's so engaging. Rarer still to care about characters so much that their voices linger on in your mind. But that's Irving. Like Dickens, the plots and characters of Irving's novels outweigh petty criticisms of details. Thank you, John.

Scott Mullin (smullin@kosmos.agu.com) from  
Washington, DC , June 2, 1998 **1**  
Cheap knock off of "The Tin Drum"

Every major element of Grass's "The Tin Drum" is stolen and made sappy: main character with stunted growth and unusual voice who works with stonecutting. Irving would probably call it an homage, but I call it cheap, thinly veiled plagiarism.

A reader from Redmond, WA , March 5, 1998 **1**  
Very hard to read...deep meaning and slow  
Owen was a likable enough character, but John Irving left a lot to be desired...seemed he could never form any decent relationship with anyone other than his small friend Owen...Book jumps around a lot and has lots of religious meaning and dialogue. Last 100 pages were actually worth reading but the first 520 were hard to get through.

A reader from Chicago , February 18, 1998 **4**  
really good - but the ending could have been better  
The first half of this book was really good. I laughed, I cried, it was better than cats. Although I recognize the evils of the Reagan administration as much as the next guy, I don't need political diatribes sprinkled throughout the narrative. These made the book seem to drag on. The ending seemed to be thrown together and not satisfying. I've heard complaints of endings in other Irving novels - maybe he just needs a good closer - put that coffee down, John!

hnikgldht from usa , February 3, 1998 **4**  
be prepared  
this is definitely not the best book I have ever read, but it's not terrible. there are many extremely far fetched scenes and the basic plot itself was something you'd see on the outer limits or something. be ready for some negative- realistic stuff.

Karen Colaiaco (colaiaco@warwick.net) from  
Matamoras, PA , January 19, 1998 **4**  
This is a unique and unbelievable, yet forceful story. This novel compels the reader to reflect on his own destiny. It makes us wonder if Owen Meany is a second Christ. He is certainly God's instrument, following what is predestined for him. There is much foreshadowing, and all the loose strings become tied together by the end of the book. But fault must be found, however, with the lengthiness of it. Too much needless detail bogs the



reader down from time to time, lessening the impact of the story.

A reader from san jose, ca , December 27, 1997 **2**

Stealth political commentary

The first 80 pages were fine. I read with interest as the narrator, who now lives in Canada, recounted his boyhood in New Hampshire and his relationship with his too-small friend, Owen Meany. Then, out of nowhere, bam! -- a few paragraphs on why Ronald Reagan was so evil. Then a few pages later, a three-page diatribe on the immorality of the Vietnam War.

Summary: If you're still living in the sixties, and enjoy Oliver Stone, this book may be for you. If your political views lie elsewhere, be forewarned.

pjilady@aol.com from Southeastern US , November 3, 1997 **3**

I'm so confused!!

I just finished \*Owen\* and I must admit, I don't know what the fuss is about. It is well written (obviously) but somewhat strange...I guess what irritated me most was feeling like I was being strung along just to see how the book ended. I also did not like all the political rantings scattered throughout the book. I'm not sure I'd even really give it a \*6\*. I wouldn't recommend but I wouldn't say not to read it either. I think it's one of those books that you have to experience for yourself and make your own decisions.

heuertz@hughes.net , September 7, 1997 **1**

Don't waste your time.

I am dumbfounded by the homage paid to this thing. After the set-up, one can just proceed to the last few pages for the martyrdom scene. You know it's coming, you know where it's gonna be, and sure enough ... Irving tells you who the good guys are, who the bad guys are. Yea, yea, root for Owen. Watch him rout the unbelieving dolts in his path. This is a rousing testimony to faith? To achieve faith one has to be bowled over by a miracle? Or shabbily tricked into a miracle, like the "evil" Reverend Merrill? This is a very transparent manipulation. When you preach to the choir, you don't have to try very hard.

A reader, July 13, 1997 **2**

I just didn't buy it

Having read this book when it came out, nearly 10 years ago?, I have only fragmentary memories of the plot etc. and am thus unable to string together an impressive and convincing list of its faults. But after scanning the above list of fawning reviews, I feel compelled to relate that after Owen Meany, I resolved never to read another Irving book. I had grown weary of stories in some way involving bears or trips to Austria (I don't think I am

alone in this weariness), so I was already circumspect about reading Irving again. My feeling was that the whole book was a set-up for one climactic moment - and I just didn't buy it. From the glowing testimonials above, it sounds like most readers bought it, though. It's almost enough to tempt me to read it again and see if I missed the boat. Almost.

A reader, July 2, 1997 **4**

Though a slow starter, an intense, memorable read. I still have visions of Owen, even though I read this book about six years ago; touching and cruel, powerful and mild.

A reader, January 21, 1997 **1!**

Another run on the Irving Merry-Go-Round

With all the showering praise being heaped on Owen Meany I thought I'd write a negative review. I thought I would point out some of the deficiencies in the characters, plot, or writing. I thought I could rant on Irving's x-rated soap opera and denigrate his pandering to the lowest common demonator. I thought there must be something wrong with the book - after all, no book is perfect. Or is it? I can't think of anything I'd have him change, other than perhaps add a few scenes to extend its length so I could enjoy it longer. Who am I kidding? I can't write a bad review of Owen Meany. It's one of the best novels I've ever read.

A reader, November 15, 1996 **4**

Interesting, captivating, and a little bizarre

I read this because it was recommended to my son as he was entering high school, and I want to exert my "parental guidance" duties for books as well as for movies.

This is really not an appropriate book for 13 and 14 year olds. It's difficult for them to follow because time keeps popping backand forth. The language (lots of cuss words) and situations are inappropriate for that age group, in my opinion.

Nevertheless, it does have an attraction to it for adults and kept me interested to the end. Owen Meany is definitely a bizarre character--his belief in his own Christ-ness and in his dream-visions, his strange relationships with women, the ways in which he copes with his small stature.

This is different from most books I read. I recommend it, as long as you're willing to go with non-run-of-the-mill, because it definitely is NOT that!

A reader, November 14, 1996 **4**

This was a good book. More action needed.

I think more description would be helpful. for the most part I really liked this book. I recomend it. It's really intence. sighned, Lost Love

A Prayer for Owen Meany  
 Chapters 7-8  
 The Dream; The Finger

Identify the following:

1. Jerrold's \_\_\_\_\_
2. The Orange Grove \_\_\_\_\_
3. The Lady in Red \_\_\_\_\_
4. Mr. McSwiney \_\_\_\_\_
5. Dr. Dolder \_\_\_\_\_
6. Father Findley \_\_\_\_\_
7. Buster Freebody \_\_\_\_\_

Answer the following plot questions briefly but specifically:

8. What was Owen's major in college? \_\_\_\_\_

9. How did Owen pay for college? \_\_\_\_\_

10. List the two items which Owen arranged to have placed on the stage in the assembly room.

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

11. WHY does Owen get expelled from Gravesend Academy?? \_\_\_\_\_

12. In what two specific ways does the statue of Mary Magdalene resemble the ressmaker's dummy?

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

13. Explain the circumstances of Harry Hoyt's death \_\_\_\_\_



14. In spite of being expelled, Owen does give his commencement speech. Describe the circumstance:

15. What is a "body escort"?

16. Who does Owen save in his dream?

17. What happens to John's "trigger finger"?

18. What precedes Owen's name on his gravestone (as seen in his dream)?

19. BONUS: How does Owen respond to this question posed to him by Grandmother Wheelwright?  
"Wouldn't you rather be murdered by a maniac?" she asked him. "\_\_\_\_," said Owen Meany.

A Prayer for Owen Meany  
Chapter 9  
THE SHOT

1. Describe Hester in 1987:

---

---

2. What is John's students' reaction to Hester?

---

---

3. Johnny says that he heard from Owen twice after he died. Relate these occasions which Johnny admits are open to interpretation and dispute.

A.

---

---

B.

---

---

4. What happens to John's hair after he "heard from Owen"?

---

---

5. On what famous British author did John write his Master's Thesis?

---

---

6. What remnant of their childhood hide-and-seek games does John find in the couch?

---

---

7. When Grandmother Wheelwright dies, what is her thumb doing?

---

---



8. Who is Eleanor Priest?:

---

---

9. What does Mr. Meany mean when he told John that Owen “wasn’t natural”?

---

---

10. What does Mr. Meany show John in the monument shop after Owen’s death?

---

---

11. When Rev. Merrill said to John, “LOOK IN THE THIRD DRAWER, RIGHT-HAND SIDE,” why does Irving capitalize these words?

---

---

12. What secret thought about Tabby’s death has Rev. Merrill carried with him all these years with a great deal of guilt?

---

---

13. Dan reveals to John why he and Tabby waited so long to get married. What is the reason?

---

---

14. Does Tabby tell Dan the identity of John’s father?

---

---

15. Describe the “miracle” that Johnny devises to restore his father’s faith?

---

---

16. What relevant person from Owen’s life chooses NOT to attend his funeral?

---

17. At Owen's funeral, who approaches John and recalls how they used to lift him up in Sunday School? ["How could he have been so light?"]

18. How does Meany die?

19. What does Mr. Meany do for a living now?

20. What does Mr. Meany wear as a reminder of Owen?

21. Who's Dick?

The events surrounding Owen's death reveal the answers to many mysteries set forth in the novel. Explain HOW each fact becomes instrumental in Owen's heroics?

22. Owen's voice:

23. Owen's size:

24. Practicing the basketball shot until it was under 4 seconds:

25. The angel's speech Owen memorized from childhood:

26. Owen's arms:



## A Prayer for Owen Meany Mid-Year Examination

Short Answers: Respond to any five of the following questions which were important but not discussed in class during our Owen Meany study.

- 1) "What made Mr. Merrill infinitely more attractive was that he was full of doubt; he expressed our doubt in the most eloquent and sympathetic ways. In his completely lucid and convincing view, the Bible is a book with a troubling plot, but a plot that can be understood: God creates us out of love, but we don't want God, or we don't believe in Him, or we pay very poor attention to Him. Nevertheless, God continues to love us -- at least, He continues to try to get our attention. Pastor Merrill made religion seem reasonable. And the trick of having faith, he said, was that it was necessary to believe in God without any great or even remotely reassuring evidence that we don't inhabit a godless universe." Explain the significance of this quote.
- 2) "It makes me ashamed to remember that I was angry with him for taking my armadillo's claws. God knows, Owen gave me more than he ever took from me -- even when you consider that he took my mother." Why?
- 3) The Lish incidents play an important role in the plot of *The Dream*. Discuss them in terms of antisemitism, John Kennedy, morality, Owen's conversation with Mrs. Lish, and Randy White.
- 4) John writes, "I have learned that the consequences of our past actions are always interesting; I have learned to view the present with a forward-looking eye." p. 407 What does this tell us about his craft in revealing the story (think Irving -- Wheelwright -- Events).
- 5) Whom does Charlie Keeling call a "nonpracticing homosexual?" What does this phrase mean?
- 6) Owen says, "IF YOU ABOLISH THE DRAFT, MOST AMERICANS WILL SIMPLY STOP CARING ABOUT WHAT WE'RE DOING IN OTHER PARTS OF THE WORLD." From today's perspective, is Owen correct in his assessment?
- 7) Owen Meany makes two appearances to John after Owen's death. Discuss the circumstances and significance of each appearance.
- 8) On pp. 518-519, Owen practically writes John's Master's thesis for him, providing the central thesis on Hardy. What is the thesis and how does it relate to the meaning of Owen Meany?
- 9) Dan says, "Owen is smart... He's smarter than even he knows. But he is not worldly." What is the significance of this comment?

Essay Section: (From Previous AP Examinations) Choose ONE

### Question One

In some novels or plays certain parallel or recurring events prove to be significant. In an essay, describe the major similarities and differences in a sequence of parallel or recurring events in a novel or play and discuss the significance of such events. Do not merely summarize the plot (1977).

### Question Two

Select a moment or scene in a novel that you find especially memorable. Write an essay in which you identify the line or the passage, explain its relationship to the work in which it is found, and analyze the reason for its effectiveness (1984).

### Question Three

An effective literary work does not merely stop or cease; it concludes. In the view of some critics, a work that does not provide the pleasure of significant closure has terminated with an artistic fault. A satisfactory ending is not, however, always conclusive in every sense; significant closure may require the reader to abide with or adjust to ambiguity and uncertainty. In an essay, discuss the ending of a novel or play of acknowledged literary merit. Explain precisely how and why the ending appropriately or inappropriately concludes the work. Do not merely summarize the plot (1973).

Averill/Nicholson

# John Irving: A Prayer for Owen Meany

## A Reading Quiz

1. When Owen Meany says, I SAW MY NAME ON THE GRAVE, he is referring to the grave of [A] Tabitha Wheelwright [B] Harriet Wheelwright [C] Sagamore [D] the armadillo [E] Ebenezer Scrooge.
2. John Wheelwright associates his unidentified father most with the quality of [A] shyness [B] selfishness [C] irresponsibility [D] lust [E] greed.
3. The school paper at Gravesend Academy is called [A] *The End* [B] *The Grave* [C] *The Academician* [D] *The Voice* [E] *The Tiger*.
4. At Gravesend Academy Owen is known as [A] "The Shrimp" [B] "The Brain" [C] "The Voice" [D] "Mean One" [E] "Big Owen"
5. Owen Meany is finally expelled from Gravesend Academy for [A] propositioning the mother of another student [B] destroying Academy property [C] causing Academy property to be destroyed by others [D] insubordination to the administrative staff and the chaplain [E] selling fake ID cards.
6. The "Lady in Red" [A] the mother of one of John and Owen's classmates at the academy [B] a mysterious figure in the window of one of the senior dorms [C] John's mother [D] a streetwalker in Boston [E] Barb Merrill.
7. The name of the school where John Wheelwright the narrator teaches, Bishop Strachan, most closely rhymes with [A] "drawn" [B] "scratchin'" [C] "stray lawn" [D] "straw man" [E] "toad".
8. John Wheelwright the narrator claims to be addicted to [A] nicotine [B] caffeine [C] "recreational" drugs [D] newspapers [E] religion.
9. The euphemism Harriet Wheelwright and Owen Meany use for "BS" is [A] "balderdash" [B] "made for television" [C] "hogwash" [D] "political smoke" [E] "claws".
10. Dr. Dolder's car that plays a central role in THE IDEA is a [A] Volkswagen [B] Mercedes [C] BMW [D] Volvo station wagon [E] Studebaker.
11. The "Holy Goalie" is [A] a Boston Bruin hockey player idolized at the academy [B] a miracle the children enact at Sunday School [C] a tool used to cut or carve granite in the monument shop [D] a statue of Mary Magdalene [E] a rude nickname for John's cousin Hester.
12. Owen pays for his tuition and expenses at university with [A] money from his "benefactor" Harriet Wheelwright [B] a scholarship arranged by Dan Needham [C] a scholarship from the military in exchange for his active service after graduation [D] an athletic scholarship [E] money from his parents.
13. Owen gets his best grades in college in [A] English [B] mathematics [C] military science [D] history [E] business.
14. Owen's biggest problem in basic training, one involving some heavy foreshadowing, is that he [A] can't "negotiate the wall" in physical training [B] can't stay awake in classroom lectures [C] becomes unexpectedly homesick for Gravesend [D] cannot maintain his relationships with former friends in New Hampshire [E] cannot stand to be separated from Hester.



15. Before Owen leaves for active duty he [A] asks Hester to wait for him [B] asks John to help his parents [C] buys a dog for Hester [D] goes to Sawyer Depot to see Noah [E] goes back to the academy and reads his valedictory speech at night by the light of the truck headlights.
16. One piece of advice in the Department of the Army's field manual advises against drinking [A] alcohol in foreign countries [B] water in Southeast Asia [C] dairy products outside the U.S. [D] juice from foreign vegetables or fruit [E] urine.
17. The bit of advice Owen gives most frequently through the novel is [A] to stay healthy [B] not to be afraid [C] to "read and study" [D] to avoid television and newspapers [E] to leave New England.
18. What Owen tells John is "my little gift to you" is [A] a dressmaker's dummy [B] a grave monument [C] a prayer book [D] the statue of a saint [E] cutting off John's finger.
19. John's hair turns white [A] rapidly when he becomes a teacher [B] over the first years after his mother's death [C] suddenly when the dead Owen Meany returns to "speak" to him [D] at the same moment his grandmother is found dead as the result of an accidental fall during a playful fight with Simon [E] just before his sudden death.
20. After Owen dies, his father tells John that Owen [A] was born of a virgin [B] always considered John his best friend [C] hated his mother [D] had sold his baseball cards after the death of John's mother [E] had buried the armadillo near the quarry.
21. John finds out after Owen's funeral that Owen's tombstone—including the date of his death—had been masterfully carved by [A] Owen's grieving father [B] the quarry foreman who had teased Owen [C] Noah Eastman [D] Hester [E] Owen himself.
22. John's real father turns out to be [A] a musician from Boston [B] a baseball player from the Red Sox [C] Dan Needham [D] the Rev. Merrill [E] Mr. Fish.
23. Dan's last trip with Tabitha was to [A] Durham for John's graduation [B] Boston for Buster Freebody's funeral. [C] Dixville Notch for a "second honeymoon" [D] Sawyer Depot to visit the Eastmans [E] Great Boar's Head for a picnic.
24. John's manufactured "miracle" for Rev. Merrill required [A] the armadillo [B] the dressmaker's dummy [C] an automobile [D] the granite statue of a saint [E] a church organ.
25. After Owen Meany dies, John discovers in his diary that the two Vietnamese phrases Owen had paid special attention to were [A] "help me" and "pray for me" [B] "where are the restrooms" and "we need water" [C] "we come in peace" and "pray with us" [D] "I am lost" and "where is the road" [E] "lie down" and "don't be afraid."

## Quotation Quiz for *A Prayer for Owen Meany*

Tell what is happening, who is speaking and what happened just before or after this event. Write about a paragraph for each passage and remember to prove that you read the novel by basing your commentary on specific concrete detail.

1. At the time, I was only eleven; I had no idea who else had attended that Little League game, and that death -- and who had his own reason for wanting to possess the ball that Owen Meany hit.
2. That was it! I thought, feeling that whatever it was in the bag was hard and lifeless and unmoving -- and a bird cage would be all that .... as silently as possible, so that the bores in the living room would not hear the paper crinkling ... I opened just a little bit of the bag within the bag.
3. "YOU DO WHAT YOU WANT, DAN, BUT YOU'RE NOT GOING TO STARE AT THIS DUMMY AND MAKE YOURSELF MORE UNHAPPY."
4. ... Owen smiled at me with his especially irritating combination of mild pity and mild contempt.... Owen didn't believe in coincidences... their lives were shaped by a terrifying and awesome design -- more powerful and unstoppable than The Flying Yankee.
5. "You will not lay down any laws for Owen Meany...You are not the rector, you are the rector's wife. You had a job -- to return this boy, safely, to the floor -- and you forgot all about it... Owen is allowed in this church at any time; he doesn't require your permission to be here."
6. Several applicants for the headmaster position admitted that their interviews with The Voice had been "daunting"; I'm sure that they were unprepared for his size, and when they heard him speak, I'm sure they got the shivers.
7. "FAITH AND PRAYER," he said. "FAITH AND PRAYER -- THEY WORK, THEY REALLY DO."
8. "DON'T BE RIDICULOUS. . . THREE SECONDS IS FAST ENOUGH. . . THE TRICK IS, CAN WE DO IT IN UNDER THREE SECONDS EVERY TIME?"
9. I froze. He walked to the table under the diamond wheel and demonstrated how I should put my hand on the block of wood.
10. "NAM SOON! . . . NAM SOON! LIE DOWN!" Even the littlest boy understood him.

Ann DeForge [ann\_butch@altavista.com]



In retrospect, the reader often discovers that the first chapter of a novel or the opening scene of a drama introduces some of the major themes of the work. Write an essay about the opening scene of a drama or the first chapter of a novel in which you explain how it functions in this way.

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In some novels and plays certain parallel or recurring events prove to be significant. In an essay, describe the major similarities and differences in a sequence of parallel or recurring events in a novel or play and discuss the significance of such events. Do not merely summarize the plot.

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A critic has said that one important measure of a superior work of literature is its ability to produce in the reader a healthy confusion of pleasure and disquietude.

Select a literary work that produces this "healthy confusion." Write an essay in which you explain the sources of the "pleasure and disquietude" experienced by the readers of the work.

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In questioning the value of literary realism, Flannery O'Connor has written, "I am pleased to make a good case for distortion because I am coming to believe that it is the only way to make people see."

Write an essay in which you "make a good case for distortion," as distinct from literary realism. Analyze how important elements of the work you choose are "distorted" and explain how these distortions contribute to the effectiveness of the work. Avoid plot summary.

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Choose a novel or play that depicts a conflict between a parent (or a parental figure) and a son or daughter. Write an essay in which you analyze the sources of the conflict and explain how the conflict contributes to the meaning of the work. Avoid plot summary.

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Many plays and novels use contrasting places (for example, two countries, two cities or towns, two houses, or the land and the sea) to represent opposed

forces or ideas that are central to the meaning of the work.

Choose a novel or a play that contrasts two such places. Write an essay explaining how the places differ, what each place represents, and how their contrast contributes to the meaning of the work.

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In a novel or play, a *confidant* (male) or a *confidante* (female) is a character, often a friend or relative of the hero or heroine, whose role is to be present when the hero or heroine needs a sympathetic listener to confide in. Frequently the result is, as Henry James remarked, that the *confidant* or *confidante* can be as much "the reader's friend as the protagonist's." However, the author sometimes uses this character for other purposes as well.

Choose a confidant or confidante from a novel or play of recognized literary merit and write an essay in which you discuss the various ways this character functions in the work. You may write your essay on one of the following novels or plays or on another of comparable quality. Do not write on a poem or short story.

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Many works of literature not readily identified with the mystery or detective story genre nonetheless involve the investigation of a mystery. In these works, the solution to the mystery may be less important than the knowledge gained in the process of its investigation. Choose a novel or play in which one or more of the characters confront a mystery. Then write an essay in which you identify the mystery and explain how the investigation illuminates the meaning of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.

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Morally ambiguous characters—characters whose behavior discourages readers from identifying them as purely evil or purely good—are at the heart of many works of literature. Choose a novel or play in which a morally ambiguous character plays a pivotal role. Then write an essay in which you explain how the character can be viewed as morally ambiguous and why his or her moral ambiguity is significant to the work as a whole. Avoid mere plot summary.

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John Irving: *A Prayer for Owen Meany*

## Essay Questions

Name \_\_\_\_\_

These questions are taken from past AP English Literature examinations. Choose *one* of the questions for your essay. Choose *A Prayer for Owen Meany* as the work you discuss. Use this page for planning; write your essay on separate paper.

## —One—

Choose an implausible or strikingly unrealistic incident or character in a work of fiction or drama of recognized literary merit. Write an essay that explains how the incident or character is related to the more realistic or plausible elements in the rest of the work. Avoid plot summary. (1978)

## —Two—

A critic has said that one important measure of a superior work of literature is its ability to produce in the reader a healthy confusion of pleasure and disquietude.

Select a literary work that produces this “healthy confusion.” Write an essay in which you explain the sources of the “pleasure and disquietude” experienced by the readers of the work. (1985)



ADVANCED PLACEMENT ENGLISH

John Irving  
A Prayer for Owen Meany  
Test

Suggested time: 40 minutes

This question accounts for one-third of the total essay section score.

Choose an implausible or strikingly unrealistic incident or character in a work of fiction or drama of recognized literary merit. Write an essay that explains how the incident or character is related to the more realistic or plausible elements in the rest of the work. Avoid plot summary.

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*for use with A Prayer for Owen Meany*  
**1978 AP ENGLISH LITERATURE SCORING GUIDE: QUESTION #3**

General Directions: This scoring guide will be useful for most of the essays that you read, but in problematic cases, please consult with your table leader. The score you assign should reflect your judgment of the quality of the essay as a whole. **Reward the writers for what they do well.** The score for an exceptionally well-written essay may be raised by one point above the appropriate score. In no case may a poorly written essay be scored higher than a three (3).

- 9 - 8** Although not perfect, these superior papers are specific in their references, cogent in their definitions, and free of plot summary that is not relevant to the question. They identify a specific and appropriately “implausible or strikingly unrealistic” incident or character, *and* they offer a convincing analysis of its relationship to specified “more realistic or plausible elements.” Their textual references are apt and specific. Though they may not be error-free, these essays demonstrate the writer’s ability to discuss a literary work with insight and understanding and to control a wide range of the elements of effective composition.
- 7 - 6** These papers present a reasonable identification of an appropriate incident or character and analyze its relationship to the work as a whole. They are less thorough or less precise in their discussion than 9-8 papers. These essays are well-written but with less maturity and control than the top papers. They demonstrate the writer’s ability to analyze a literary work, but they reveal a more limited understanding than do the papers in the 9-8 range. Generally, essays scored 6 present a less sophisticated analysis and less consistent command of the elements of effective writing than essays scored 7.
- 5** These essays tend to be superficial in analysis even though they may respond to the assigned task with a plausible reading of the work. They may identify an incident or character whose implausibility or lack of realism falls short of supplying a sufficient contrast with the rest of the work or they may offer an analysis that is pedestrian, mechanical, or inadequately related to the chosen details. These essays may reveal simplistic thinking or immature writing. They often do not achieve an appropriate balance between textual reference and the writer’s commentary. They often demonstrate inconsistent control over the elements of composition and are not as well conceived, organized, or developed as the upper-half papers; however, the writing is sufficient to convey the writer’s ideas.
- 4 - 3** These papers reveal an incomplete understanding of the task required by the prompt. They may select an incident or character that is inappropriate or insufficiently differentiated or may fail to concentrate on one incident or character at the cost of a reasonable analysis. Discussion is likely to be unpersuasive, perfunctory, underdeveloped or misguided. The meaning the writer deduces may be inaccurate or insubstantial and not clearly related to the question. The analysis of relationship may be omitted altogether. The writing may convey the writer’s ideas, but it reveals weak control over such elements as diction, organization, syntax or grammar. Typically, these essays contain significant misinterpretations of the question or the work they discuss; they may also contain little, if any, supporting evidence, and practice paraphrase and plot summary at the expense of analysis.
- 2 - 1** These essays compound the weakness of essays in the 4-3 range and are frequently unacceptably brief. Although the writer may have made some effort to answer the question, the essays are poorly written on several counts, including distracting errors in grammar and mechanics. Essays scored a one (1) contain little coherent discussion.
- 0** This is a response with no more than a reference to the task.
- This is a blank response or a composition unrelated to the assignment.



## A Prayer for Owen Meany: Plot Summary

### Chapter 1: The Foul Ball

Johnny narrates some background information. He introduces his family, Owen, Gravesend etc. Strong emphasis is put on the fact that Owen and his family do not fit in with the rest of the town. They are outsiders, and their previous history is not very well known in the townspeople, however, Owen mentions the "unspeakable outrage" that his parents had suffered before, but we are not told what it is yet.

Johnny describes his mother, Tabitha Wheelwright. She is a strikingly beautiful woman, who is very concerned over Owen's future. She visits the Meany granite quarry in an attempt to convince Owen's parents that Owen should attend the Gravesend Academy and that they would not have to pay for it because Owen would get a scholarship. Her plan is to push the Meany's into sending Owen to private school are cut short, however, when Owen kills her accidentally with a baseball when he hits a foul ball and it hits her in the left temple.

### Chapter 2: The Armadillo

The events in this chapter occur before Tabitha's death. Johnny reminisces about first meeting Dan, his mother's future husband and his future adoptive father. Tabitha meets Dan on the Boston and Maine, the railroad that she takes to Boston every week for her singing lessons with "the famous singing teacher", a practice she started with the encouragement of Pastor Merrill. Pastor Merrill convinced Tabitha's parents that singing lessons were as sound an investment in a person's future as college, since Tabitha had already said she did not want to attend college. Tabitha's refusal to attend college stemmed from her desire to aid her mother as her father was dying. After meeting Dan on the train, she tells him where she lives in Gravesend, knowing that he is going to Gravesend to interview for a teaching position at the Academy. When Dan comes to meet the Wheelwrights, he gives Johnny a stuffed armadillo as a present, the only present any of Tabitha's boyfriends gave to Johnny that he kept. Johnny also describes his extended family, his cousins and aunt and uncle. His cousins, Noah, Simon and Hester are all older than him, and fiercely competitive. Owen wants to meet them and comes over the day after Thanksgiving to visit. When he comes to visit, Johnny's cousins are awed by him. Their awe, however, turns into confusion as Owen accidentally

wets his pants when they are playing a game of hide and seek.

The end of the chapter shifts to the time after Tabitha's death. The day after the baseball game, Owen gives Johnny all his baseball cards, as a symbol of his sorrow over accidentally killing his best friend's mother. Johnny, in return (with the advice of Dan), gives Owen the armadillo for the same reason. Owen, however, takes the claws of the armadillo, something that outrages Johnny, but Dan finds supremely symbolic. Dan explains that the clawless armadillo symbolizes Owen's feelings of helplessness and guilt surrounding Tabitha's death, an explanation which Johnny accepts.

### Chapter 3: The Angel

Most of this chapter happens before Tabitha's death as well. Johnny introduces the dressmaker dummy, saying that his mother had a habit of buying clothes, copying them on her own and returning the originals to the store. It was her way of minimizing her expenditures and assuring herself of clothes that fit her. Johnny also describes their attempts to make Tabitha like the red dress that she got from a posh Boston clothing store, the one she tried to return, but could not because she said the store burned down.

Later in the chapter, Owen is spending the night over at Johnny's house when he complains that he is feeling ill. Johnny, not wanting to get out of bed, tells Owen to go and get help from Tabitha. Owen does so and returns to Johnny's room, saying that he saw someone in Tabitha's room, saying that he thought it was an angel. Johnny goes with Owen to his mother's room to see the "angel", but there is nothing there. Tabitha wakes up and determines that Owen has a fever and should go back to bed. Johnny goes to get some medicine for Owen, but while he is gone, Tabitha falls asleep with Owen in her arms. Owen, not wanting to wake her up, simply stays where he is. Later, Johnny's grandmother, comes to Tabitha's room in the night and startles Owen, who then yells at her. Harriet is scared nearly to death and Owen's scream wakes up most of the neighborhood. Owen later describes Harriet Wheelwright as "wailing like a banshee".

Dan's fascination with directing amateur productions is well fed at the Academy and in Gravesend as he begins productions of all kind of plays for the town. He convinces Tabitha to take the leading role in only one of his plays, Angel Street. In a dress rehearsal for this



play, Tabitha wears the red dress which she never intended to keep. The dress makes her incredibly uncomfortable, and Tabitha does not wear the dress in the real performances of the play.

#### **Chapter 4: The Little Lord Jesus**

In this chapter, the first Christmas after Tabitha's death. Johnny takes part in his church's annual christmas pagent. Owen is normally cast as an angel, but this year, he gets himself cast as the baby Jesus, much to his parents' shock. The part of the angel goes to Harold Crosby (a child with a proclivity for vomiting) and Johnny becomes Joseph. Johnny remarks at how creepy it is to see Owen taking charge of the production, to the point where he ends up being the director and remakes the entire production, much to the dismay of Barbara Wiggin, the wife of Rector Wiggin.

Mr. Morrison, the mailman, drops out of the annual production of A Christmas Carol, stating his disgust at not having any lines to say as the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. Owen tries to convince him of the importance of the part, but fails. Owen decides to try out for the part himself.

#### **Chapter 5: The Ghost of the Future**

Owen takes over Mr. Morrison's part as the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. He stuns the crowd with his eerie performance even though he never says a word. On Christmas Eve day, the pagent at the Episcopal Church of which Owen and Johnny are a part takes place. It is an utter disaster since everything goes wrong. Barb Wiggin screws up lighting, Harold Crosby messes up his lines, the kings are falling over each other and to top it off, Owen banishes his parents from the pagent when he notices they are there.

Christmas Eve day is also the final performance of A Christmas Carol, starring Owen as the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. Owen becomes ill and his illness makes him pale and weak with a very high fever. He refuses, however, to relenquish his acting duties to anyone and the final performance of the play goes on. In Owen's scene in the graveyard, Owen faints on stage, wakes up and rushes off the stage. Mr. Fish salvages the scene with his acting, but backstage, Owen proclaims that he saw his name and date of death on one of the graves in the makeshift graveyard set. Dan says that it must be a hallucination because of Owen's fever, and Pastor Merrill takes Owen and Johnny to their respective homes. When Johnny returns home, he finds Lydia, the former maid of Harriet, has died and the new maid, Germaine, has hidden herself in the secret passageway out of fear.

Later that evening, Johnny calls Owen to discuss some inappropriate feelings he started having about

Germaine. Owen and Johnny agree that is an indication of Johnny's biological father.

#### **Chapter 6: The Voice**

In this chapter, Owen and Johnny begin life at the Gravesend Academy, just as Tabitha had wanted, for the both of them. Owen was a scholarship student, attending the Academy on the basis of academic merit, Johnny, on the other hand is told by the Academy that he should repeat his ninth grade year at the Academy. Owen, out of faith to his friend, says that he will repeat the classes with Johnny. At the Academy, Owen quickly establishes himself as the ruler of the student newspaper "The Grave". His satirical remarks and blatant criticisms overwhelm the administration to the point where they abandon the fish only Friday meals at the cafeteria and allow him to interview prospective new headmasters which are being considered in the wake of the current headmaster's (Archibald Thorndike) impending retirement. His contributions to the school newspaper earn him the nickname, the Voice. It is in the winter of 1959 that the Reverend Pinky Scammon falls on the steps of Hurd's church and is killed. Pastor Merrill is hired as his replacement under Owen's advisement.

On weekends, when the weather did not permit outdoor activities, Owen and Johnny began practicing what Owen called "The Shot". This involved Owen jumping into Johnny's arms and being lifted up to a basketball hoop to "dunk" the ball. Owen and Johnny were also of legal draft age, thus, they each carried a draft card. Owen discovered how to make a blank draft card on the copy machine in the Grave office. He began making fake draft cards for students who wished to have fake ID's and he charged \$21 a card.

Finally, in the spring of 1960, the Academy hired a new headmaster, his name was Randy White, the only man who had denied Owen's personal interview. Owen did not like Mr. White from the start. Mr. White's first action as headmaster was to build a new headmaster's residence right in the middle of campus. This provided the headmaster with a new means to "entertain" prospective donors for the Academy. Pastor Merrill moves from his dormitory apartment to the old headmaster's house with his family. Next, Mr. White moved the traditional morning prayer from Hurd's church to the Main Academy building and renamed it the morning meeting. Owen disapproved of this change, saying that the Main Academy building allowed for the headmaster to "grandstand" in front of the students, but the rest of his peers were rather happy with the change. Mr. White also made other changes: removing the Latin requirement and changing Academy lawyers. Owen challenged every change that was made.



In January of 1961, when President Kennedy is inaugurated as President, Owen sees fit to support the new Catholic president since he feels JFK is the model American citizen. After hearing JFK's speech, Owen decides to drop his sarcastic tone and he stops making fake draft cards. Basically, Owen decides to change his ways out of respect for a Catholic President.

### **Chapter 7: The Dream**

As seniors at the Academy, Owen and Johnny are allowed to take the train to Boston on weekends if they chose to do so. Using their fake draft cards, Owen and Johnny patronize a local strip club, which Owen finds to be "disgusting" and "degrading". He suggests that he and Johnny leave the strip club, find a nice part of town and just "look at it". Johnny then begins to realize just how deliberate Owen's actions really are. They find themselves on Newbury Street where Owen takes an interest in a local clothing store window. The store's name is Jerrols, and it is the store where Tabitha got the red dress that she hated. Johnny and Owen enter the store and begin questioning the owner and his son about Tabitha. The store owner, upon looking at a photograph which Owen has brought with him, remembers Tabitha as a local singing talent called "The Lady in Red". The owner of the store (Mr. Giordano) tells Owen and Johnny that Tabitha used to sing at a local supper club whose name he can't remember.

Upon learning this information, Owen and Johnny proceed to visit the "famous singing teacher" that Tabitha took lessons from. Owen had previously scheduled an appointment with the singing teacher, who was very anxious to meet him because his voice was so strange. Owen and Johnny question the singing teacher (Mr. McSwiney) about Tabitha. Mr. McSwiney remembers Tabitha by her picture and says that he got her the singing job at a supper club called The Orange Grove. The discovery of Tabitha's double life bothers Johnny because it makes him feel detached from the memory of what he felt his mother used to mean to him.

Later that year, Owen and Johnny are talking to Larry Lish, another student at the Academy. Larry Lish tells them that President Kennedy has been having an affair with Marilyn Monroe. This infuriates Owen and Larry Lish says his mother knows for sure and that she was coming to visit, so he could ask her himself. Mitzy Lish (Larry's mother) tells Owen that JFK is indeed having an affair with Marilyn Monroe, she then proceeds to insult and embarrass Owen by taunting him. Owen responds by making a very risqué remark about Mitzy Lish. This remark angers Mrs. Lish who tells the headmaster and tries to get Owen thrown out of school. Owen's friends and ardent supporters on the faculty are able to stave off the headmaster and executive committee's axe. The incident lands Owen on probation

and he is forced to go to counseling sessions with the school psychiatrist, Dr. Dolder.

Early one wintery Saturday morning, as Owen was arriving to his job as a faculty waiter, Owen notices Dr. Dolder's Volkswagon Beetle sitting parked near the Main Academy building. At the same time, a large portion of the basketball team walks by, on their way to the team bus to go play an away game. Owen convinces them to lift up the car and put it on the stage of the Main Academy building which they do readily. Later that morning, a janitor discovers the car on the stage and the headmaster, along with a portion of the faculty, attempt to move the car before morning meeting. They successfully get the car off the stage, but as they try to move the car down the stairs, they lose control and the car flips over with the headmaster inside. The casualties of the incident are Mr. Tuberlari's ankle, the first couple rows of benches, the marble stairs, the car itself and Mr. White's back.

Pastor Merrill questions Owen about the car, only to steer suspicion away from him, but the headmaster knows that Owen is responsible. Mr. White, however, is unable to pin the blame on Owen and Owen gets away. Shortly after that, however, Larry Lish is caught trying to buy alcohol with his fake draft card. He fingers Owen as the maker and Owen is expelled from school.

In retaliation for being expelled, Owen takes the statue of Mary Magdalene from the Catholic school in Gravesend, cuts her head and arms off and bolts her to the stage of the Main Academy building. Mr. White is infuriated but he has already lost control of the school. The board does not renew his contract and he does not return as headmaster the next year. Johnny and Dan discover that Owen has been divulging information about a recurring dream he has been having to Pastor Merrill, but they do not know any specifics.

Owen is preparing to go to college, but his acceptances to both Yale and Harvard are delayed in light of the incident with the statue but Owen declines them both. Instead, he enrolls at the University of New Hampshire as a member of the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC).

### **Chapter 8: The Finger**

In the summer of 1962, Johnny begins to work for his uncle as a logger. Owen starts working the granite quarries for his father. One day, while logging, Simon stabs himself in the leg with a cant dog and has to be taken to the hospital. At the hospital, they meet a guy who tells them that Marilyn Monroe has died. The news is sobering to Owen.

Owen and Johnny begin as freshmen at the University of New Hampshire as commuters from Gravesend. They tend to hang out with Hester's friends since she attends the university as well, but is a senior.



Owen begins to develop a "minimalist style" and becomes rather inconspicuous and goes unnoticed as a student. The next summer, Johnny begins working in the Meany Monuments shop. the next school year, while studying geology one day, Owen and Johnny hear that President Kennedy has been killed. The news is also very sobering to Owen.

In the summer of 1964, Owen finally replaces the statue of Mary Magdelene for the Catholic Church, something he had been endeavoring to do for more than 2 years. That same summer, as part of his ROTC training, Owen goes off to basic training. He is given a second rating and is told he will not see combat. This disappoints Owen for reasons the reader learns later.

After Owen returns from Basic Training, he and Johnny are sitting in Hester's apartment when Owen finally describes the dream he has been having. His retelling of the dream angers Hester and she starts beating him. Johnny takes Owen away and brings him to his grandmother's house. Owen and Johnny decide to take a trip to the Sawyer Depot because Owen had always wanted to go, but never got the chance. They stayed for a short while with the Eastman's and then went to the border, just to see what Canada looked like.

Upon their return, Owen goes to Fort Huachuca in Arizona. He becomes a casualty officer, handling the bodies of the dead as they return home to be buried. Hester remarks that he is in the right business. In the spring of 1967, Johnny receives a notice from the Gravesend draft board to report for his physical. Owen takes a leave and returns home to Gravesend to help Johnny. Owen decides to make Johnny physically unfit to serve. Using the diamond wheel, he cuts off the top two joints of Johnny's right index finger.

### **Chapter 9: The Shot**

Owen knows he is going to die and he knows how and when. He makes his own headstone with the diamond wheel and tells his father not to look at it until after he died. After Owen's death, Johnny visits the Meanys to express his condolences. At this time, Mr. Meany tells Johnny that Owen was a virgin birth.

This news angers Johnny and he visits Pastor Merrill for guidance. At this time he discovers that Pastor Merrill is the one who took the baseball that killed Tabitha; Pastor Merrill is Johnny's biological father. Johnny takes the ball and leaves.

Angered already by the Meanys, and now even more infuriated by Pastor Merrill, Johnny returns to the Meany house and takes the dressmaker dummy which Owen has fitted with the arms from the original statue of Mary Magdelene and goes back to the church. Johnny puts the dummy in the shadows and throws the baseball through one of the stained glass windows. Pastor Merrill comes out and tries to find Johnny, knowing it was him that threw the ball. He sees the

dummy in the shadows and thinks it's Tabitha which causes him to practically faint. Johnny takes the dummy and ball, drives out to the breakwater in Rye and throws the ball into the ocean. He then walks out to the sandbar and heaves the dummy into the water as far as he can and watches it sink into the ocean. Afterwards, he returns to Hester's apartment and moves out, then he goes to 80 Front Street and tells his grandmother he is leaving for Canada after Owen's funeral.

The story now jumps to just before Owen's death. Johnny receives a late night call from Owen, asking him to come out to Arizona to visit. Johnny accepts with a little prodding and flies out to meet Owen for a few days. At the airport, Johnny meets Owen and soon after meets the Jarvits family, the family of the warrant officer (Frank Jarvits) whose body Owen was in charge of. Owen, Johnny and an officer at the airport who accompanies them (Major Rawls) leave the airport. Johnny and Owen check into a hotel for the night. The next day, Owen, Johnny and Major Rawls meet the mortician and make arrangements for the soldier's funeral. Then, all three of them go the warrant officer's residence where they again meet the Jarvits family. Owen and Johnny meet Dick Jarvits, a severely disturbed and very violent 15 year old boy who can't wait to be old enough to go fight in the Vietnam War. Major Rawls says that Dick is "beyond saving" but Owen says that it is not their place to say who is beyond saving.

Two days later, Owen and Johnny go to the airport to leave town. At the airport, they run into a group of nuns who are taking care of a group of Vietnamese children. The nuns ask for Owen's assistance in taking the boys to the bathroom and Owen agrees. While Owen and Johnny are in the bathroom, Dick Jarvits breaks down the door and throws in a grenade. Johnny catches the grenade and tosses it to Owen who then jumps into Johnny arms and is lifted up (the shot) to the window sill high above their heads. The grenade detonates, sending Owen flying into a nearby sink. Major Rawls, who is also at the airport, catches Dick running away from the bathroom. Dick tries to attack the major, but Rawls kills him. Johnny finds Owen and sees that the blast has ripped his arms off below the elbows. Owen dies of blood loss and shock.

*One note, I have not summarized anything that Johnny narrates from Toronto. The story does not flow well with all the flash backs and flash forwards. I hope to keep refining these summaries to make them more complete, clearer and just better. ☺*

“Eric”

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Ithaca/5203/summary.html>



## Characters

There are many characters in the novel, and here I have tried to list them all with a little description of them. Some of them have little more than a sentence about them in the whole novel, but I have attempted to describe the importance of each character in the plot of the story. Remember, I have *tried* to list all the characters, but I know have missed quite a few. If you want me to put one that I have missed on here, just tell me who it is and where you think the character belongs. I have broken down the characters into these categories.

### *Main characters:*

Owen, Johnny, Tabitha and Dan

### *Characters From Early In the Timeline-*

Noah, Simon, Buzzy Thurston and the Dowlings

### *Characters From Later In the Timeline*

Larry Lish, Randy White, Katherine Keeling and Dick Jarvits

### *Minor Characters*

the girl barber and the guy at the strip

### *Characters who are real people*

Robert Frost, Thomas Hardy, Ronald Reagan and Lyndon Johnson

## The Main Players

The definition of a major character varies from person to person, but here are some of the characters I feel are most prominent in the novel.

*Owen Meany-* The hero of our story, albeit tragic. The namesake of the novel, the instrument of God. Could he truly know the date and cause of his death? Was his sole purpose in life only to save the Vietnamese children? The mind wants to say "No" because the alternative is too fantastic to comprehend. Still, it is Owen who helps Johnny through school, gives him the gift of reading, saves his life, and keeps him out of Vietnam.

*John Wheelwright-* An alternative to Owen would be to make Johnny the hero of the story. It is his life that is profoundly altered by what happened to Owen. He is the illegitimate child of his mother, the son of a cursed pastor. He is a troubled soul, his love of Owen is only matched by his hatred of Owen's control, the control that he never has in his life. He is the narrator of the story, the only one who witnessed the miracle that was Owen from beginning to end.

*Hester Eastman-* Johnny's bizarre cousin. She is an "aging rock queen". Her loudness is matched only by her tendency to be somewhat promiscuous, but only Owen is able to win her heart. She has a strange relationship with her only cousin, Johnny. His love for her goes beyond family affection, yet neither of them is able to understand it fully. She is the angry soul in a world of people conceding defeat.

*Harriet Wheelwright-* Johnny's grandmother, the venerable queen of Gravesend. She is the arrogant, fussy, picky, critical, old fashioned ruler of 80 Front Street. All that aside, she is still one of the most enjoyable characters in the novel. She married Mr. Wheelwright (whose name is never revealed) not only for love, but for the name as well. She is Mrs. Wheelwright and nothing less. It is through her influence and money that Owen is able to get the clothes he needs to attend the Academy. She lives to be 99 years old, dying 2 weeks prior to her 100th birthday.

*Tabitha Wheelwright-* Johnny's mother and arguably the most scandalous person ever to live in Gravesend. Johnny's birth, his father and her refusal to discuss both of them landed her in at the bottom of the social ranks in the small town. Her affair with Pastor Merrill didn't hurt her and gave her what she wanted which was one child. Johnny always thought she was the perfect mother and there were never any words to the contrary. She loved Johnny and she loved Owen too, almost as if he were her son as well. Her death at the hands of Owen's foul ball was the defining moment of Johnny's childhood. Just for fun, here are the lyrics to Tabitha's favorite Frank Sinatra song: "Too Romantic."

*Daniel Needham-* Tabitha's unfortunate husband, unfortunate in the sense that he loves Tabitha immensely and yet is she is taken from him after only one year of marriage. His love for her is evident as he remains a widower for the rest of his life. He is

Johnny's adoptive father, something that allows Johnny to attend the academy. Dan served quite effectively as Johnny's father, giving him everything his true father did not.

*Reverend Lewis Merrill-* Johnny's biological father and the pastor of the town's Congregationalist Church. His weakness and his failed attempts to be strong disappoint Johnny immensely. However, it is Pastor Merrill's conversion to the utmost faith in God that redeems him a little in Johnny's eyes.

*Martha Eastman-* Johnny's aunt, Tabitha's sister. Martha is jealous of her sister for being prettier, but still loves her. She calls Tabitha "a little simple" out of misunderstanding. Her inability to comprehend what happens to her sister is a sign of her familial affection.

## Characters from Johnny's childhood

Here are some of the more minor characters from early in Johnny's life.

*Mr. Fish-* Harriet Wheelwright's curious and commonplace neighbor. He is what Johnny calls the "quintessential neighbor". Someone who is just like everyone's image of what a neighbor should be.

*Noah Eastman-* Johnny's oldest cousin. He avoided Vietnam by joining the Peace Corps. He was the first to suggest the game "Last One through the House Has to Kiss Hester", the game which Johnny secretly enjoyed.

*Simon Eastman-* Johnny's second oldest cousin, the "wildest" of the three. He avoided Vietnam due to injuries to his knees while skiing. He is the one who enjoyed to be beaten by his older brother Noah. Came up with the name "Hester the Molester".

*Firewater-* the Eastman's slobbering boxer.

*Alfred Eastman-* Noah, Simon and Hester's father. Married to Martha Wheelwright, the sister of Tabitha. Had triple bypass surgery in his later years.

*Watahantowet-* The Native American sagamore who signed over ownership of the land on which Gravesend was built to the English with a totem with no arms.

*Buzzy Thurston-* Hit the lazy grounder which should have ended the fateful baseball game. Later was killed in a car accident while under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol on Maiden Hill Road near the Meany Granite Quarry. The drugs and alcohol were a desperate attempt to avoid Vietnam.

*Harold Crosby-* The second angel, Owen's replacement in the rafters of the Episcopal Church during the Christmas Pageant of 1952. His clumsiness won him the part.

*Harry Hoyt-* The one who walked and brought Owen up to bat during the fateful game. He served in Vietnam in the Navy and was killed by a pit viper's bite while he was peeing under a tree outside a Vietnamese brothel. His mother became a rabid anti-Vietnam activist after his death, her opinions on the war eventually cost her a job and forced her out of Gravesend.

*Caroline O'Day-* Daughter of Larry O'Day, the owner of the car dealership. She is a parochial school student who is described by Johnny as being "aggressive as a corvette" when it came to boys. Friend of Maureen Early.



*Maureen Early*- Reputed to have wet her pants twice while viewing performances by Owen as the Ghost Of Christmas Yet to Come. Her father, a teacher at the Academy, was a supporter of Owen during the rough encounters with Mr. White.

*Amanda Dowling*- Played the part of The Ghost Of Christmas Past. An extreme feminist and practiced the art of role reversal with her husband, Arthur.

*Arthur Dowling*- Amanda's husband. He and his wife were very interested in creating sexual role reversals. The possibility of them having children was most disagreeable to Dan.

*Chief Ben Pike*- The chief of police who asked for the ball, the "instrument of death", the "murder weapon" in the death of Tabitha Wheelwright. In his teens, Johnny would date his daughter, Lorna.

*Mr. Chickering*- The coach of Owen and Johnny's Little League team and the first to reach Tabitha's body when she was killed. He rearranged her body to a more comfortable and modest position. His traumatic experience at that game scarred him for the rest of his life.

*Reverend Dudley Wiggin*- The Rector of the Episcopal church. The "bumpkin of boredom" as Johnny described him. A retired airline pilot, he has a tendency to be a pulpit thumper during sermons.

*Barbara Wiggin*- Rector Wiggin's wife, a "backslapping redhead" who thought Owen as cute until his performance in the Christmas Pageant in 1953.

*Germaine*- The maid brought in to replace Lydia. She gave Johnny his first feelings of lust and was a disaster around the house. She eventually resigned.

*Ethel*- The other maid brought in to replace Lydia. She exhibited a brute, mindless strength which made her suited for the job, but wholly uninteresting as a person.

*Lydia- Harriet* Wheelwright's first maid. She was Harriet's best friend and had to have her leg amputated when she developed cancer. She was confined to a wheelchair for the rest of her life and died the night of Owen's final performance as the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come. Her death was marked by her striking resemblance to the woman she served for a large portion of her life.

*Donny Kennmore*- The rheumatic fever boy too ill to play baseball. His father was a butcher and played the part of Marley's Ghost.

*Mary Beth Baird*- The Virgin Mary in the Christmas pageant. She marries a farmer's son after having his child. She is in attendance at Owen's funeral. It is her cow costumes which contribute to the chaos at the Christmas pageant.

*Dan's Family*- They are in attendance at Dan and Tabitha's wedding, but they did not approve of the marriage. They thought of Tabitha as being dishonorable as to have a child out of wedlock.

*Lorna Pike*- Chief Ben Pike's daughter. Johnny dates her in later years.

*Mr. Morrison*- The "cowardly mailman". He has the part of the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come, but passes on the part when he discovers there are no speaking lines. The part later goes to Owen.

*Larry O'Day*- Caroline O'Day's father. He plays the part of Bob Cratchit in *A Christmas Carol*.

*Mr. Early*- Maureen's father. He is a teacher at the Academy, and later becomes an ardent supporter of "The Voice".

*The Meanys*- I guess I will put them here, even though they come up later in the novel as well. They are Owen's parents, the ones who had the audacity to tell an eleven year old boy he was a virgin birth. Owen appears ashamed of them and tries to separate himself from them as much as possible.

## Characters who appear later in the timeline

*Larry Lish*- Owen and Johnny's classmate at the Academy. He upset Owen by telling him JFK was having an affair with Marilyn Monroe. His revealing of the origins of the fake draft cards got Owen expelled from the Academy.

*Mitzy Lish*- Larry's mother. Owen propositioned her after she insulted him. She attempted to get him expelled for being rude and anti-Semitic, but that was never proven.

*Archibald Thorndike*- Former headmaster of the Academy. He is a supporter of Owen and retired half way through Owen and Johnny's time at the Academy. He was replaced by Mr. White. He wrote a book called "Life In The Tide pool" which he sold independently. He dies sometime between his retirement and Owen's death.

*Randolph White*- Old Thorny's replacement as Headmaster. He attempts to reform the school and is opposed by Owen who becomes his mortal enemy. Mr. White expels Owen but is not kept on as headmaster the following year.

*Samantha White*- Wife of Mr. White. She requested a new house for the headmaster.

*Dr. Dolder*- Psychiatrist who thought Owen's anger and attitude was a result of accidentally killing Tabitha.

*Reverend Pinky Scammon*- The pastor at Hurd's Church on the campus of the Academy. He dies when he slips on the steps of the church in the winter and is replaced by Pastor Merrill.

*Mr. Peabody*- Academy faculty who lived in Waterhouse Hall. A bachelor not likely to improve on his single status.

*Mr. Tubulari*- Academy faculty who also lived in Waterhouse Hall. A bachelor and rigorous outdoorsman. He sprains his ankle attempting to remove Dr. Dolder's VW beetle from the stage of the Main Hall.

*Mr. Brinker-Smith*- British born biologist who is an inventor on the side. Father of twins.

*Mrs. Ginger Brinker-Smith*- Wife of Mr. Brinker-Smith. The object of lust for many Academy students. She and her husband's torrid love making served to batter Owen under the bed of a room in Waterhouse Hall. She and her husband leave the United States in opposition to the Vietnam War.

*Canon Mackie*- Canon of the Grace Church on-the-Hill in Toronto, Canada.

*Canon Campbell*- Canon of Grace Church on-the-Hill in Toronto after the death of Canon Mackie.

*Katherine Keeling*- Works at the Church as well, she is one of Johnny's good friends and invites him to Georgian Bay every summer with her family.

*Mrs. Brocklebank*- Mother of one of Johnny's students at Bishop Strachen, Heather. She is a person who becomes interested in almost anything that people mention and she wants to borrow Johnny's copy of "Life in the Tide pool" by Archibald Thorndike, the former headmaster of the Gravesend Academy.

*The Giordanos*- The father and son who own the clothing store named Jerrold's. They sell the red dress to Tabitha in Boston. She claims that it is their store that burns to the ground.

*Buster Freebody*- The piano player at The Orange Grove. He dies before Tabitha and she attends his funeral. It was the last trip that Tabitha and Dan took together before she died.

*Mr. McSwiney*- The "famous singing teacher" in Boston. He is described as being old, and rather overweight. When Johnny was a child, he and his grandmother thought that Mr. McSwiney might be the man Tabitha met on the "good old Boston and Maine" railroad.

*Major Rawls*- The man in Arizona who ends up killing Dick at the airport. He is portrayed as an intellectual, but lonely man.

*The mortician*- The "shopping mall" mortician who takes the body of Frank Jarvits, the warrant officer.

*Dick Jarvits*- The boy who ends up killing Owen with a homemade grenade. He is a pot smoking, drug using, violence driven young man who is eventually killed by Major Rawls immediately after throwing the grenade at Owen.

*The Jarvits Family*- Truly dysfunctional. His half sister is pregnant, supposedly by her half brother, the dead warrant officer, as postulated by Major Rawls. The parents are drunks, there simply isn't much else to say about them.

*The Vietnamese Children*- They are at the airport as part of the Catholic Relief Services efforts. Owen saves them with his life.

*The Nuns*- They are accompanying the children at the airport. One of the nuns tries to save Owen's life, but his injuries are too severe.

*Major General LaHoad*- Owen's first commander at Fort Huachuca.

*Eleanor Pribst*- A new teacher at Bishop Strachen, she argues constantly with John about books and such.



*The Poggios*- The family that ran a supermarket in Gravesend and who continued to deliver groceries to 80 Front Street even after they discontinued that service.

*Col. Eiger*- He gives Owen a Number 2 ranking when he enters the army.

## Minor Characters

*The shortstop*- He didn't cleanly field the ground ball by Buzzy Thurston and in his own way helped to bring Owen to bat that day during the fateful game.

*The pitcher*- He walked Harry Hoyt to load the bases that brought Owen up to bat during the fateful game.

*The guy at The Strip*- The only person to fight with Owen. He was arrested and sent to juvenile hall.

*The Barber*- The girl barber in Toronto who cuts Johnny's hair. Johnny says he can never get used to the idea of a girl barber.

## Real Characters

### Political Figures

*Ronald Reagan*-Johnny is always making remarks about how he feels Reagan is an incompetent President. His best description is "Ronald Reagan is a vapid young drunk".

*Oliver North*-Johnny mentions to the girl barber in Toronto that he wants his hair cut as short as Oliver North's.

*Marilyn Monroe*-The instigator of Owen's problems with Mitzy Lish. When Mitzy Lish tells Owen that Marilyn Monroe is having an affair with JFK, Owen is insulted and propositions Mitzy Lish which nearly leads to his expulsion.

*John F. Kennedy*-The President who's inaugural speech prompts Owen to stop making and selling fake draft cards.

*Robert F. Kennedy*-Owen remarks that if Robert Kennedy was next in line for Marilyn Monroe, what else is he next in line for. Shortly after, Robert Kennedy is assassinated.

*General Westmoreland*-Commander of the U.S. Armed Forces in Vietnam for a time.

*Jimmy Carter*-He later pardons all the draft dodgers in the 70's, but Johnny still does not want to come back to live in the United States.

*Lyndon Johnson*-President of the United States who initiated Operation Rolling Thunder which Owen describes as simply bombing Vietnamese targets very heavily [Owen uses more graphic terms, I'm being polite here, this is a family website. :)]

### Literary Figures

*Robert Frost*-Owen memorizes Frost's poem *Birches* and frequently quotes it to Johnny when Johnny's faith seems to be lacking. Owen also encourages Johnny to memorize a few of Frost's shorter poems such as *Fire and Ice*.

*Robertson Davies*-Mentioned in passing.

*Thomas Hardy*-The author of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, the book that gave Johnny a lot of trouble at the Gravesend Academy. He has his students at Bishop Strachen read it as well, and thinks they didn't read the introduction like he told them to. This prompts him to consider giving his students a pop quiz on the introduction which he later decides not to do simply because it makes him feel guilty.

"Eric"

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Ithaca/5203/characters.html>

## Analysis

### *Chapter 1: Foul Ball*

This chapter sets up a lot of the background for Johnny's family and Owen's family. During a Little League baseball game, Owen hits a foul ball which hits Johnny's mother, Tabitha, in the temple, killing her.

*Three things to keep in mind:*

1. Owen is not part of the upper crust in Gravesend. This shapes the opinions that other people will have about him.
2. Owen's assertion that he is not Gravesend Academy material.
3. The baseball. Consider who might have taken it and why. Decide for yourself. The identity of the person with the ball could be important later.

### *Chapter 2: The Armadillo*

This chapter takes place mostly before Tabitha's death. Dan, Johnny's adoptive father, is introduced. Owen gets to meet Johnny's cousins for the first time.

*Three things to keep in mind:*

1. The armadillo is symbolic of many things. Think about other things it could mean.
2. The red dress is VERY symbolic. Consider other novels and other meanings for the color red.
3. Think about where Hester might have hid Owen. This doesn't have much bearing on the rest of the story, but is interesting to think about.

### *Chapter 3: The Angel*

Owen thinks he sees an angel at Tabitha's bedside in the night, but is told it is just a hallucination due to a high fever that he has.

*Three things to keep in mind:*

1. Consider the angel and what kind of angel it might have been that Owen thought he saw.
2. Think about why Owen wanted the dummy and whether his intentions are purely out of interest for Dan's well being.
3. Hester. Think about Hester's role in the relationship between Johnny and Owen.

### *Chapter 4: The Little Lord Jesus*

After Tabitha's death, Johnny and his family stay in Gravesend for the holidays instead of going to Sawyer Depot like usual. Johnny participates in the Episcopalian Church Christmas Pageant which is revamped by Owen.

*Three things to keep in mind:*

1. Consider Owen's power in the church Christmas Pageant.
2. The denial of Owen's trip to Sawyer Depot is significant of something later in the book, keep it in mind.
3. Think about why Owen's parents reacted in the manner that they did when they found out he was playing the baby Jesus.

### *Chapter 5: The Ghost of the Future*

Owen takes over the part of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come in the Gravesend Players production of A Christmas Carol and steals the show. Lydia's death on Christmas Eve is foreshadowed by Owen who also provides the icing on the cake in the Christmas Pageant disaster.

*Three things to keep in mind:*

1. Think about the date that Owen sees on the tombstone even though it is not revealed.
2. Think about why Owen would banish his parents from the Christmas Pageant.
3. Consider the role of the Christ Child being played by Owen.

### *Chapter 6: The Voice*

Owen and Johnny begin attending the Academy. Owen establishes himself as the "voice" of the student body. Owen's position is so powerful, he even has a part in the selection of the new headmaster to replace the retiring incumbent.

*Three things to keep in mind:*

1. Consider JFK, his effect on Owen and the possibility for Owen to be hurt.
2. The shot.



3. Consider the hiring of Pastor Merrill as the new school pastor and why Owen thought Merrill would be right for the job.

### *Chapter 7: The Dream*

Owen and Johnny discover Tabitha's secret singing career in Boston. Owen is thrown out of school for selling fake draft cards. He decides to enter the ROTC to pay for college and attend the University of New Hampshire with Johnny.

#### *Three things to keep in mind:*

1. Consider the statue of Mary Magdelene and what was done to her.
2. Owen's propositioning of Mitzy Lish is indicative of something.
3. Consider why Owen decided to attend the University of New Hampshire instead of Yale or Harvard in relation to his dream.

### *Chapter 8: The Finger*

Owen and Johnny are in college. Owen, as part of the ROTC program, goes to Basic Training. After college, Owen becomes a casualty officer at Fort Huachuca in Arizona, working with the bodies of casualties of the conflict in Vietnam. To save Johnny from going to Vietnam, Owen cuts off the top two joints of Johnny's right index finger with the diamond wheel.

#### *Three things to keep in mind:*

1. Consider the trip to Sawyer Depot and Owen's remark about Canada.
2. Think about what losing two joints of his finger will do to Johnny's state of mind and outlook on life.
3. Owen does not like Catholics. Consider why he spent so much time working to replace the statue of Mary Magdelene in the Catholic churchyard.

### *Chapter 9: The Shot*

Owen invites Johnny to spend a few days with him in Arizona. Johnny goes and a crazed, drug addicted boy named Dick Jarvits tries to kill them with a grenade in the Phoenix Airport. Owen saves Johnny and a group of nuns and Vietnamese children through the use of the shot. Johnny discovers the identity of his biological father.

#### *Three things to keep in mind:*

1. Consider why Johnny would be disappointed to find the identity of his biological father.
2. Think back to all the armlessness references throughout the novel.
3. Consider, finally, the red dress and its place in the story.

"Eric"

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Ithaca/5203/analysis.html>

## Timeline: A Prayer for Owen Meany

"Eric"

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Ithaca/5203/timeline.html>

This is my attempt to chronicle the major events from as early as I can surmise to the latest points in the novel. The dates in italics represent more of a guess than actual evidence from the book. When possible, I have included the month and day, but this was only possible for a few events. I have tried to estimate the time of year some events occurred in order to indicate which came first and the order which the events proceeded.

**1923-** Johnny's mother, Tabitha Wheelwright born

**1939-** Noah Eastman born to Martha Wheelwright and Alfred Eastman

**1940-** Simon Eastman born to Martha Wheelwright and Alfred Eastman

**1941-** Hester Eastman born to Martha Wheelwright and Alfred Eastman

***Spring, 1942-*** Owen is born

**Summer 1942-** Johnny is born to Tabitha Wheelwright

**1948-** Daniel Needham first meets Tabitha Wheelwright on the Boston & Maine, also first meets Johnny and Harriet Wheelwright

**July, 1952-** Tabitha Wheelwright and Daniel Needham are married

***July, 1953-*** Tabitha Wheelwright killed by foul ball

**1953-** Owen Meany told by his parents that he is a virgin birth

**December, 1953-** Johnny participates in his first Christmas pageant at the church also Owen's memorable performance in A Christmas Carol

**December 24, 1953-** Lydia dies

**1954-** Noah begins attending the Gravesend Academy

**1955-** Simon begins attending the Gravesend Academy

**1958-** Johnny and Owen begin attending the Gravesend Academy (a year late)

**1959-** Noah, Simon and Hester graduate, Owen invites Hester to Senior Dance, rumored the first time they slept together

**Winter 1961-** Owen is put on probation for propositioning Mitzy Lish

**Early 1962-** Owen is kicked out of the Academy for selling fake ID's

**Summer 1962-** Owen joins the army to pay for college

**Fall 1962-** Owen and Johnny begin at The University of New Hampshire

**Spring 1965-** Owen goes to basic training

**1966-** Johnny graduates from U of N.H. with honors while Owen just graduates

**Fall 1966-** Johnny begins graduate school, Owen goes to Ft. Huachuca in Arizona

**Spring 1967-** Johnny has his finger cut off to avoid the draft

**July 8, 1968-** Owen is killed in Arizona

**July 1968-** Johnny discovers his father is the Rev. Lewis Merrill

**Fall 1968-** Johnny leaves for Canada

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## Symbols In Owen Meany and Interpretations

Of course, with any novel such as Owen Meany, there are plenty of symbols that are relevant to the story. Some are more obvious than other. Here are some that I think are important and what I think they mean.

### The Red Dress-

The big one in my opinion. It seems to be symbolic because of the association people have with the color red. Red expresses something hidden, something sultry or somewhat passionate, red being the color for love, especially in roses. Of course, the red in Owen Meany symbolizes Tabitha's departure from what her life normally is, a quiet, peaceful, predictable existence in a small town. But with the red, Tabitha is outgoing, sexy and daring, hence her singing and affair with her hometown pastor, Pastor Merrill.

### Armlessness

This is the symbol which Irving beats to death in the story. There is so much foreshadowing that the ending may not be much of a surprise anymore to the careful reader. Still, the lack of arms shows up in lots of places, Watahantowet's armless totem, the dressmaker dummy, the armadillo which Owen mutilates and of course, the statue of Mary Magdalene. There may be more, but those are the most obvious.

### The Armadillo

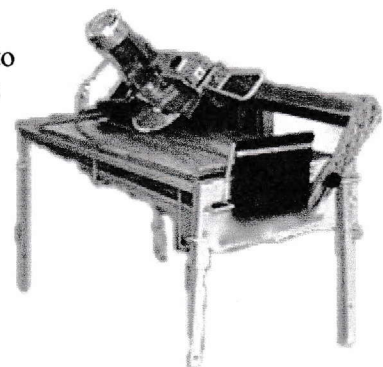
The armadillo is one of the symbols which is used to represent the motif of armlessness. But I think that it means a little more than that. It is the only one of the presents that any of Tabitha's "beaus" gave to Johnny that he kept. Obviously this is because he really likes Dan and has accepted him into the family. I think the armadillo represents Dan's inherent tendency to understand Johnny and be more of a father to him than his real father ever was or ever could be.

### The Wedding Present

The gift Owen made for Tabitha and Dan for their wedding day is as symbolic as it is foreshadowing. It foreshadows the death of Tabitha as Johnny says later and it also symbolizes how connected Owen's life is with granite, gravestones and death in general. Owen's association with granite appears later, in the pedestal for the remade statue of Mary Magdalene and in his own tombstone.

### The Granite Saw

The granite saw that the Meany Granite Quarry uses to make monuments to sell. It represents how Johnny feels detached from the world, from his peers and from his generation. The cutting off of his finger causes him to lose sight of what his generation during Vietnam was fighting over and why Owen wanted to be a part of it. Johnny's loss of his finger via the "diamond wheel" isolates him and keeps him from ever thinking of his life in the same way again.



## Allusions to Other Great Works ("Eric")

Of course, a novel such as this will have plenty of allusions and references to other novels, poems etc. Here are some of the more blatant and obvious ones with my own personal interpretations of their meanings:

*The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne-  
The most obvious of all the allusions. The red dress, the illegitimate child by way of a priest. The allusion is carried out through the entire book. The only difference between the two is that the priest does not die in Owen Meany. Pastor Merrill lives and actually benefits from his transgression. Arthur Dimmesdale, however, suffers for his crime and eventually dies from it. Irving even went so far as to incorporate the name Hester into his story. There is even some connection, seemingly, between the two Hesters. Hester Eastman represents sort of what the people of Salem in *The Scarlet Letter* must have thought Hester Prynne was like.

The Bible-  
Of course, there is a lot of the Bible in Owen Meany, it's a substantial portion of what the story is built upon.

*Tess of the D'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy-  
Johnny mentions this book by Thomas Hardy a number of times when he is teaching his Grade 12 girls at Bishop Strachen. The significance of this is a little vague. It more or less represents Johnny's trouble as a student and as a reminder of how much Owen's help meant to Johnny in school.

*A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens-  
A very nice young lady noticed that I had apparently missed probably the most obvious of all allusions, that being the allusion to Charles Dickens' novel *A Christmas Carol*. I guess my only excuse would be that it was so obvious, I just didn't see it. Anyway, The most obvious inferences concerning *A Christmas Carol* is the Gravesend Players production of a play version in the winter of 1953, the year that Owen played the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come. I guess a deeper reference could be made concerning Owen and Scrooge. Both of them are told about their futures, but Scrooge makes an effort to change his future, Owen does not.



## Places in *Gwen Meany*: Real and Imagined

Here are some of the landmarks, locations and places that provide the setting for many of the scenes in the novel. I have tried to describe the general location for some of them.

### Real Places

Rye, NH- The place where Archibald Thorndike went to live after his retirement, about 10 miles from the supposed location of Gravesend. Also, the place where the Meany Granite Quarry dumped their slag. The breakwater was a favorite place of Johnny and Owen where they liked to sit and look at the ocean. Since the breakwater was made with broken slabs from the quarry, Owen felt he had a "right" to sit there. Johnny returns here for the last time after he discovers the identity of his biological father, Pastor Merrill.

Hampton Beach, NH- Another beach near the Atlantic that Owen and Johnny frequent. This beach is south of the beach at Rye.

Lake Ossipee, NH- This is a lake in the north of the state of New Hampshire. It can be found at the intersection of State Highways 16 and 25.

Mount Chocorua, NH- This mountain is located in the north of the state of New Hampshire. It is part of White Mountains which is protected as part of the White Mountains National Forest. The mountain is approximately 3,475 ft tall and is almost due north of Lake Ossipee.

Durham, NH- Durham is north of Portsmouth and is the home of the main campus of the University of New Hampshire. It is a town of approximately 10,000 (I don't know if that is with or without students). Durham can be found at the intersection of US Highway 4 and State Highway 108. Johnny and Owen attend the University of New Hampshire when they graduate from the Gravesend Academy.

Boston, MA- The town where both Johnny and Owen discover the secret life of Tabitha Wheelwright. I am trying to find out whether there really is a Newbury Street (where Jerrold's is) in Boston.

Phoenix Sky Harbor Airport, AZ- This is actually the name of the international airport in Phoenix! (I was surprised) It is located almost in downtown Phoenix, near US Highway 60 which cuts through the town East / West.

Fort Huachuca, AZ- Fort Huachuca is located in the extreme southeast corner of the state. It is near a town named Huachuca City, a very small town of less than 2,000 people. The fort is actually west of the town. The nearest large city is Tucson.

Canadian Places- I know that Georgian Bay is real, but I cannot find anything about Bishop Strachen or Grace-Church-On-The-Hill. I will try to determine if they are real or not as soon as possible.

Bishop Strachen, ON- The private school where Johnny teaches in Canada.

Grace-Church-On-The-Hill, ON- The church that is affiliated with Bishop Strachen in Toronto.

Georgian Bay, ON- This is the place where Johnny visits with his friend, Katherine Keeling, and her family. There actually is a Georgian Bay, it is in northern Ontario and it has many islands. The actual island is not important, and its identity is never given.

### Made Up Places

Gravesend, NH- The hometown of both Johnny and Owen. It is an imagined small town in New Hampshire. It has been speculated that Gravesend is based on John Irving's own home town of Exeter. From the evidence at hand, this seems most likely to be true. First, Exeter was founded by the Rev. John Wheelwright after he was banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony along with Anne Hutchison. Also, there is a private school, the Phillips Exeter Academy in the town. Plus, the town is in the perfect location, being seemingly the right distance from Rye, Hampton Beach and Durham.

Squamscott River- The river that runs through Gravesend. It is where Johnny breaks his wrist when he slips on some rocks, it is also the subject of a heated debate between Mr. Meany and the town concerning the desire of the town to remove some of the mud in the river to make room for the Academy rowing team. There actually is a river flowing through Exeter, but I don't know if it is named the Squamscott.

Sawyer Depot, NH- The hometown of Johnny's aunt, uncle and cousins. Sawyer Depot is supposed to be in the "north country" and very small. I cannot find it on the map, therefore I assume it is not real, but it could be so small it does not appear on the map, but I think that is unlikely. In any case, the town is farther north than Lake Ossipee or Mount Chocorua.

Gravesend Academy, NH- The private school and Johnny and Owen attend after they spend one year at Gravesend High School. The Academy (I believe) is based on the Phillips Exeter Academy. Whether any of the faculty or description of the school parallels the real school is unknown to me.

"Eric"

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Ithaca/5203/timeline.html>



## Aspects of Owen Meany That Fascinate and Confuse Me

There are aspects of this book that I find to be truly amazing. I hope someone will find at least some of this to be amazing to them too, but I could be wrong.

### Fascinating

#### *Tabitha Wheelwright-*

I have always been partial to the character of Tabitha Wheelwright, mainly because she reminds me of someone I used to know (though her name isn't Tabitha). Anyway, the description of her in numerous places in the novel fascinates me. I think she is Irving's most developed character. She is never described to the reader. In fact, Irving only describes a few things, her waist which is said to be "girlish" and her bosom. That is all we are given. No indication is made of her face or any other part of her body. I find this interesting. Irving gives only what is necessary for the story and no more. This allows the reader to insert their own image of what Tabitha Wheelwright should look like. Irving does this pretty much with every character, Owen Meany being the biggest one he does not do this for. It allows the characters to become more linked to the reader, more personal, and makes the story more realistic. As for being the most developed character, Tabitha is the one that comes up in the story most often and yet she dies in the first chapter. This I find interesting because it is her life that is a main part of the story, the quest to find Johnny's father. Of course, it is Tabitha's life that gets dissected to reach this goal. I find that her personal life is the most developed in that one can trace most of her life (except for early childhood) just from what is said about her later in the flashbacks and in the stories people have to tell about her.

#### *Owen's voice-*

Owen's unique voice is something that every reader has to imagine for themselves. I believe it is something that you cannot describe to another person because I think it is essential that the reader be able to determine these kinds of things themselves, to enhance the enjoyment of the story. Owen's voice is described, but the description, while somewhat useful, is not entirely adequate and allows the reader to make their own sound in their minds.

### Confusing

Here are some aspects of the story that confuse me or just don't seem right. I guess some of them might be considered just technical inconsistencies.

#### *Age-*

Irving described the sisters Tabitha and Martha as being quite a few years apart, but this still confuses me. Johnny is less than a year younger than Hester, Martha's youngest child. So one would assume that Tabitha and Martha are rather close in age. But, Irving wrote that Martha was already a senior in college and already engaged to be married when Tabitha had said she wasn't going to college because she wanted to give comfort to her dying father. After she declares she isn't going to college, Tabitha starts going to singing lessons in Boston. One would assume, knowing the prudish nature of the Wheelwright family that Martha would not have had any children out of wedlock, so we have to assume that Martha is around 22 years old when she gets married. If we assume the shortest possible time, that would make her 23 when Noah is born, 24 when Simon is born and 25 when Hester is born. Also, that would make her 26 when Johnny is born to Tabitha. Since Tabitha is 19 when Johnny is born, that would make her and Martha about 7 years apart in age. But, it was at least 4 years earlier that Tabitha declared she wasn't going to college and that would put her singing lessons starting at around age 15 or 16. Since her father died while she was pregnant, one would have to assume that her father was ill and dying for at least 3 years. Remember, this is the shortest time span in which all of this happened.

It could very well be that Martha is more than 7 years older than Tabitha. This seems strange to myself, but maybe it makes sense.

*Owen and the Vespers-*

Owen had been participating in the Christmas Pagent at the Episcopal Church for a number of years. The first year that Johnny participates, 1953, Johnny notices that Pastor Merrill and his wife are in attendance at the Wiggin's Pagent. He is surprised by this and he says that "Owen was surprised, too." Owen says to the Merrills, "HAVE YOU CHANGED CHURCHES?". Rector Wiggin replies that he and his wife go the Congregationalist Vespers every year and the Merrills attend the Pagent every year. It seems odd that Owen would not have noticed them in the years past when he had participated in the Pagent.

*The Statue of Mary Magdalene-*

Johnny says that the statue of Mary Magdalene is "life-size". Later, when Owen takes the statue, he cuts it off its pedestal, so that would imply that the entire statue is in tact, head to toe. Then, he cuts off the head and arms (symbolic gestures to be sure) and puts her on the stage. But, when the statue is compared to the height of Randy White, it is said that the statue is taller, even without the head. That seems odd, either Randy White is incredibly short (albeit, he is described as being "compact"), or Mary Magdalene is extremely tall.

*The Diamond Wheel-*

In the novel, Owen uses the diamond wheel to cut off Johnny's right index finger to keep him from passing his physical and going off to fight in the Vietnam War. This seems reasonable, but someone told me that the ability of a diamond tipped blade to cut through something as awkward as a human finger would require a lot of time and strength. In the novel, Irving describes the entire amputation as taking fractions of a second, but in real life *supposedly* this would have been a very painful and longer process. I cannot verify this as true, but if it is, there might be something that either is overlooked by Irving or another testament to Owen's miraculous abilities as a human being.

*The Morning Meetings-*

I have a feeling that this won't seem strange to anyone but me. Anyway, the day that Owen instructs the basketball players to put Dr. Dolder's Volkswagon Beetle on the stage of the Main Academy Building is supposed to be a Saturday. I would assume that the incident with Mr. White getting stuck in the car on it's way down the staircase happens that same day. It seems kind of strange that there would be a morning meeting on a Saturday. I know that there are classes on Saturday morning, but it still seems strange, given that seniors don't have any classes, that they would still have to go to a morning meeting on a Saturday. Like I said, I may be the only one that finds that a little strange.

*Robert Frost's poem, "The Gift Outright"-*

This is something that I am not 100% sure about. When Owen and Johnny are watching Kennedy's inauguration on TV, they also get to see Robert Frost trying to read this poem in the wind and snow. Owen remarks that someone should help him read it because he looked so feeble on the television. Owen also reads the poem along with Frost, having memorized it himself already. This does not make sense to me because as I recall, the inauguration is the first time Frost ever released the poem, therefore, there was no way Owen could have already known the verses. I believe that this is true, but it could be a mistake on my part.

"Eric"

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Ithaca/5203/timeline.html>



## A sample study schedule A Prayer for Owen Meany

Essays due 15 December • Exam 14 December • Revised essays due 16 December

Ch	Title	Pages	DueDate	Rate	Additional Assignments
1	The Foul Ball	1-36	Thu 10 Nov	18	Annotation
2	The Armadillo	37-93	Mon 14 Nov	14	Underlining chapters. 1&2
3	The Angel	94-145	Wed 16 Nov	26	
4	The Little Lord Jesus	146-200	Fri 18 Nov	27	
5	The Ghost of the Future	201-255	Tue 22 Nov	14	
6	The Voice	256-336	Mon 28 Nov	13	
7	The Dream	337-416	Wed 30 Nov	13	
8	The Finger	417-509	Mon 5 Dec	15	
9	The Shot	510-617	Fri 9 Dec	27	

### Proposed Essay Topics

John Wheelwright, Narrator

*Owen Meany*: John Irving Keeps the Faith

Irving on Love and Parenting

Faith, Fate, and Predestination in *Owen Meany*

The Hero in *Owen Meany*

Compare/Contrast with *Cider House Rules*

Irving's American History: 1959-1989

Sentiment and Sentimentality in Irving's *Owen Meany*

Foreshadowing

The Preachers: Merrill and Wiggin

Tragi-Comic Vision

Fate and Fatalism in *Owen Meany*

Bible (or Allusions) in *Owen Meany*