

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

A Prayer for Owen Meany

by John Irving

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ISBN 978-1-60389-904-8
Reorder No. 201182

A Prayer for Owen Meany

Notes

A Prayer For Owen Meany can be compared to the novels written by Charles Dickens. The memorable characters are well developed, the stories are interesting, and the themes are complex. It is a fictional memoir chronicling how John Wheelwright comes to believe in God because of his friendship with Owen Meany. John Irving, the author, wrote, “I’ve always asked myself what would be the magnitude of the miracle that could convince me of religious faith.” It is Owen Meany who can do that. The novel also explores the political atmosphere in America during, before and after, the Vietnam War. Irving stated, “I wanted in this novel to create two victims of the Vietnam period in our history,” referring to the novel’s two main characters, Owen Meany and John Wheelwright.

Because of the length and difficulty of this book, it is recommended for advanced eleventh and twelfth grade students. The novel does contain frequent instances of strong profanity, numerous adult themes, and the questioning of religious practices and beliefs. In addition, pre-teenage and adolescent sexuality, fantasy, and discovery sometimes play an important role in *A Prayer for Owen Meany*.

All references come from the Ballantine Books edition of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, copyright 1989.

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss the relationship between religious faith and proof of God's existence as the main theme of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*; consider whether or not a man can fully and faithfully believe in God without concrete proof of His existence.
2. cite incidents from the story to support the following sub themes:
 - Injustice is part of God's will.
 - Faith based on evidence is not faith.
 - Doubt is normal and appropriate.
3. discuss the extent to which this is a coming-of-age story for John and for Owen.
4. comment on the relationship between sexuality and morality as expressed in this story; cite incidents to illustrate the following:
 - One's sexuality is powerful enough to overcome morality.
 - Sexuality can be neutralized by the events in a person's life.
 - Interest in one's sexuality is a normal part of growing up.
5. discuss the motif of armlessness or amputation in the story as an image representing man's helplessness against injustice, helplessness to defy God's will, and inability to defy fate.
6. relate the ways each of the following illustrates the motif of helplessness described in objective five: the armadillo, the dressmaker's dummy, John's finger, the statue of Mary Magdalene, and Watahantowet's totem.
7. discuss the repeated criticism of the Catholic church in this story as a motif representing the problems organized religion has in meeting individual needs; include the reluctance of the church to support "new" miracles.
8. discuss the extent to which the events in Owen's life are predestined and the extent to which they are the result of his free will.
9. point out the importance of fathers in relationship to John's maturation in this story.
10. point out examples of the author's use of doubles and secondary characters, who exhibit the same traits as the primary characters, in order to enhance understanding.
11. discuss Owen as a symbol for the connection between man as a sexual, emotional being and God as a spiritual being; consider Owen's appearance, presence, and sexuality.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Find five vocabulary words that can be used to describe Owen and five words for John.
2. Why is John writing this memoir?
3. For what reasons does Owen believe that he is God's instrument on earth? Cite incidents from the story which serve to reinforce this belief for Owen.
4. State the significance of the following names in the story: Meany, Gravesend, Tabby, John, Wheelwright, Hester, Simon, Noah, Needham.
5. If you have read *The Scarlet Letter*, discuss the ways Hester the Molester is similar to Hester in Hawthorne's novel.
6. Find at least five epithets in this story which help to delineate Owen's personality.
7. Discuss the significance of the title of the novel.
8. What steps does Owen take to discover the identity of John's father? How is his identity finally revealed to John? What is John's reaction?
9. Briefly discuss Hester's relationship with Owen. In what ways does it differ from her relationship with John?
10. In what sense is it ironic that Reverend Merrill regains his faith when he sees the dressmaker's dummy?
11. Discuss the significance of the armlessness and amputation motif throughout the novel.
12. Owen has an apparent disgust or dislike for the Catholic Church. Discuss his reasons for this attitude and whether or not you think he overcomes his aversion to the Catholic Church by the end of the story.
13. What evidence is there in the story that Dan Needham is a good father?
14. Cite incidents from the story which seem to support Owen's belief in fate. At one point in the story, he lectures John on his friend's lack of willingness to take responsibility for his own life. Do you think Owen's concept of free will conflicts with his belief that God shapes all of our lives?
15. How do each of the following characters define faith: Reverend Merrill, John as the adult narrator, Reverend Dudley Wiggin, and Owen?

Chapter 1 – The Foul Ball

VOCABULARY

ell – an extension to a house
heterodox – departing from or opposed to the usual beliefs or doctrines
imperious – overbearing, arrogant
lexicon – dictionary
martyr – a person who suffers or dies rather than give up faith or principles
matriarchal – ruled by a woman
morosely – ill-tempered, sullen
obdurate – unrepentant
sagamore – a Native American chief
seditions – rebellious
stoic – remaining indifferent to the external world and to passion or emotion
translucent – partially transparent

1. Why does the narrator say, “I am doomed to remember a boy with a wrecked voice...”? Where is the narrator living at the time he is writing this memoir? What is the setting of the story?

2. Briefly describe Owen Meany.

3. What nickname do the other baseball players give to Owen? What role does Owen play on the baseball team? How does Owen feel about baseball?

Chapter 3 – The Angel

VOCABULARY

amulet – an object worn on the body because it is believed to have the power to protect against injury or evil (see talisman)
firmament – the heavens
literally – actually, in fact
provincialism – narrowness of outlook
sepulchral – of the grave or burial; dismal; gloomy
stoical – showing indifference to joy, grief, pleasure, or pain; unflinching under suffering
talisman – anything thought to have magic powers; a charm to keep away evil (see amulet)
torpor – a state of being dormant or inactive
virulent – extremely poisonous or injurious

1. The dress dummy is important to Tabitha: “There was not a night when my mother lay in her bed unable to see the comforting figure of the dressmaker’s dummy; it was not only her confederate against the darkness, it was her double.” What might the dressmaker’s dummy symbolize in this story? In what sense is it a double for Tabitha?

2. Why does Owen decide to remain “bravely” in Tabitha’s room after he sees the angel?

3. For what reasons does Owen believe that there are no accidents in life? How does his belief in predestination and patterns relate to Tabitha’s death?

13. Identify more epithets associated with Owen besides “The Granite Mouse” and “The Prince of Peace.” Why do you suppose there are no epithets for John?

14. Why does Owen want his essays published only in capital letters? How do the faculty at the school feel about “The Voice”?

15. Which sports does Owen enjoy? What is his “absurd goal” when he plays basketball? What steps does he take to reach this goal?

16. Why does John go to see the school psychiatrist? How does Owen help John overcome his learning problems?

17. What evidence is there that the adult John constantly thinks about Owen? Why does he sarcastically write, “Oh, what a nation of moralists the Americans are!”?

Chapter 9 – The Shot

VOCABULARY

addlebrained – dull, foolish

disabuse – to rid of false ideas

incipiently – in the first stage of existence; just beginning to exist or come to notice

parochial – narrow

precognition – the perception of an event before it occurs

unctuous – a smug, smooth pretense

1. John writes that “my finger is a perfect fit; we handicapped people must learn to make the best of our mutations and disfigurements.” Who else might John be referring to? In what sense does Hester make the best of her “mutations and disfigurements”?

2. How does John explain his continuing virginal state?

3. Briefly describe the two incidents when John believes he has “heard” from Owen after Owen’s death.

4. John’s dislike of America and American politics seems to stem from his grief and anger over Owen’s death. He blames the country for losing his best friend. Find a passage in this chapter that supports this idea.
