

A Prayer for Owen Meany Study Guide

A Prayer for Owen Meany by John Irving

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Plot Summary

Middle-aged John Wheelwright sets out to narrate the story of his childhood in Gravesend, New Hampshire. He remembers his best friend, Owen Meany, as the boy who killed his mother and restored John's faith in God. John describes Owen as a strange child. A tiny boy, even for a dwarf. His skin is luminous and his voice high and nasally. John remembers Owen's love for his mother, Tabitha Wheelwright, as bordering on a crush. Tabby, in return, treats Owen as though he were her own son, going so far as to intervene with his parents on Owen's behalf to ensure his attendance at the prestigious Gravesend Academy. One of the greatest mysteries in John's life is the identity of his father; John was conceived during a "fling" his mother had while traveling to Boston. The Wheelwrights are an old and distinguished Gravesend family (the original John Wheelwright was one of the founding fathers) where as Owen's family are not. Owen accidentally kills Tabitha Wheelwright, John's mother, with a foul ball during a baseball game. A brokenhearted John spends half of his time with his grandmother and the other half the time with his stepfather, Dan Needham. John loves Dan, who teaches history at Gravesend Academy, as Dan becomes like a real father to him.

In December 1953, six months after Tabby's death, Owen Meany wins two starring roles—one as baby Jesus in the church production of the Christmas story and the other as the Ghost of Christmas Future in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. The church production goes amok and awry when Owen spies his parents in the audience. His performance in the Dickens play is equally inspiring and frightening. During the final performance, Owen has a vision in which he sees his own gravestone engraved with the date of his death. Owen begins to experience a reoccurring dream revealing further details of his death, leading him to believe he is God's instrument. He reveals to John that he believes he interrupted an Angel of Death when it came to take Tabby and as a result, God caused him to kill her. John believes in a fevered state, Owen hallucinated, mistaking Tabby's dressmaker's dummy for an angel.

Owen forces John to begin to practice "the Shot" and the boys enter Gravesend Academy. Owen thrives both academically and socially and writes a column called "THE VOICE." However, he makes an enemy of the new headmaster who finally manages to expel Owen when he discovers Owen has been making fake IDs for classmates. Owen retaliates by removing the statue of Mary Magdalene from the local Catholic Church and placing it in the morning meeting hall. Owen's expulsion loses him scholarships to Harvard and Yale as well as the University of New Hampshire. He enrolls in ROTC to pay for college. John declares an English major and excels whereas the only classes in which Owen receives good grades are the ROTC classes. Owen and Hester, John's only female cousin, develop a relationship. Owen hopes for a combat assignment in Vietnam, as that is where he believes—based on his visions—he will die. However, his short stature prevents him from completing the obstacle course and he is assigned administrative duties in Arizona (he accompanies the bodies of fallen soldiers to their homes). John attends graduate school. Owen amputates John's "trigger finger" with a diamond saw at his father's monument shop to help ensure John is never drafted.



In the summer of 1968, Owen calls John and asks him to come to Phoenix for a few days. The two friends spend a few days together. John accompanies Owen to his next assignment—delivering the body of a dead soldier to his family—and observes the soldier's younger brother, Dick Jarvits. The large fifteen-year-old boy lives for the day when he enlists, goes to Vietnam, and kills Vietnamese. On the day he believes he is destined to die, Owen accompanies John to the airport for his return flight. They watch a group of nuns with a number of Vietnamese war orphans disembark from a plane. Owen assists the nuns, escorting the male children to the bathroom. Dick Jarvits enters with a live grenade in his hand. In perfect Vietnamese, Owen orders the children to lie down. Jarvits throws the grenade into the room and John catches it. John and Owen's dogged practice of "The Shot" pays off; John tosses the grenade to Owen, who leaps into the air. John catches Owen and lifts him to the windowsill. The grenade detonates, blowing Owen's arms off below his elbows. Owen bleeds to death in the lap of a nun and dies a hero.

The day before Owen's funeral in Gravesend, John visits Reverend Merrill. Owen's ghost possesses the reverend and reveals Merrill is John's father. The reverend reveals he wished for Tabby to die just before the ball struck her and as a result, God has forsaken him. John plays a prank on the reverend to help restore his faith—he places Tabby's dressmaker's dummy outside the church and the reverend mistakes it for her ghost. His faith restored, Reverend Merrill is able to deliver a heartfelt eulogy for Owen.

After the funeral, John visits the Meanys. Mr. Meany claims Owen was a virgin birth, something he told Owen when he was eleven years old and about the same time Owen accidentally killed Tabby Wheelwright. To John, this revelation is monstrous and cannot possibly be true. John continues to ask God to give Owen Meany back.



Chapter 1

Summary

Narrator John Wheelwright begins the story with a discussion of his faith. He is a believer not because he was brought up in the church, but rather because of his childhood friend, Owen Meany. John describes his religious metamorphosis from Congregational to Anglican churchgoer. As a child, he and the other children used to torment Owen Meany—an incredibly small boy with an unusual voice—during Sunday School; they would lift him above their heads and pass him around the room while the teacher, Mrs. Walker, was out of the room. Owen would lose the contents of his pockets—money and baseball cards—when hoisted aloft, but the other children always returned his items to him. John recalls that Owen loved baseball, but was never allowed to swing at the ball, as his strike zone was too small. John also recalls on occasion, Owen Meany was hung from hooks in the gymnasium and inside his school gym locker. Owen never reacted but rather stoically and silently waited for someone to help him down. John recounts the history of Gravesend and his family's illustrious and privileged place within it—his ancestor John Wheelwright (for whom he is named) founded the town. John also reveals his mother had him out of wedlock and kept his paternity a secret, only telling her family she met the man on the train that took her to Boston for her singing lessons. He establishes the Meany's as poor outsiders who moved from Boston to Gravesend. The Meany's own a defunct granite quarry. During the summers, the boys swim in the quarry lake. The only rule Mr. Meany has is they go into the water one at a time with a rope tied around their waist. Owen is the only boy ever to break this rule. Playing a trick on the other boys, Owen shimmies out of the loop around his waist and swims to a nearby crevice in the rocks. When the boys pull the empty loop back to shore, they are paralyzed by fear. Reappearing, Owen tells them their inaction has killed him. John's mother marries an Episcopalian and they switch churches. Owen also switches churches due to some unknown offense the Catholics have committed against his parents. Because of his mother's new husband, John is able to attend the illustrious Gravesend Academy. John's mother insists that Owen—the brightest student in all of Gravesend—also attend the Academy. Owen argues that his family does not have the funds for such items as a school uniform or transportation and John's mother insists she can provide those items for Owen. From the lingering scent of her perfume, Owen discovers John's mother spoke to his parents about his schooling. John remembers the last Little League season the boys spent together. He recalls Owen is allowed—encouraged even (as a means to end a losing game)—to swing at pitches. He does, and somehow miraculously connects with the ball. The ball flies foul, striking John's mother in the temple and killing her. In the ensuing chaos, Coach Chickering throws a coat over John's head, obscuring his view. John later finds comfort in the darkness beneath the coat. The Chief of Police argues with the coach over the location of the ball. John suspects Owen Meany took the ball that killed his mother.



Analysis

The opening chapter of *A Prayer for Owen Meany* is structured in a way that introduces the main characters (specifically narrator John Wheelwright and title character Owen Meany) and familiarizes readers with the world they inhabit. The chapter establishes narrative voice and tone—John Wheelwright is an old man looking back on his life, specifically the moments of his life influenced by and entwined with Owen Meany's life. The narrative lacks chronology, however, as John reminisces and ruminates in a seemingly random fashion. However, upon closer examination, it is clear the author has structured these memories in such a way that the reader becomes familiar with specific characters' personalities and traits through seemingly random vignettes before major plot points occur, such as Owen's accidental murder of John's mother. The narrator also introduces two mysteries—the identity of John's father and the "insult" the Catholic Church made to Owen's family—as well as a number of important themes that include and revolve around religious faith. The characters themselves symbolically represent and depict aspects of these themes. Owen Meany, for example, represents something almost otherworldly—his small stature, near weightlessness, luminescent skin, and broken voice mark him as different and not quite human. Yet, his family's business—granite mining—as well as their home's location on the precipice of the quarry mark him as a terrestrial creature. Furthermore, his name, "Meany," is both a social and literal signifier of commonness and small stature. Socially, it is an outcast's name as the Meanys were not founding fathers of Gravesend; physically Owen seems too small and insignificant to be an instrument of God and yet, the narrator assures the reader he is. Thus, Owen Meany represents a bridge between the spiritual (supernatural) and the world (natural).

It is important to note that although John's mother is not fully developed in this chapter—and in fact, dies, thus removing her from the narrative—she is an important symbol of idealized woman and mother. She is described as loving, trust worthy, kind, and unflappable as well as physically beautiful. Owen's description of her breasts as, "THE BEST BREASTS OF ALL THE MOTHERS" indicates how morality (as Owen Meany is the moral core of the novel), sexuality, and possibly religion entwine during the course of the narrative.

Vocabulary

fraternity, incongruous, ominously, totem, indignation, lexicon, percussive, obdurate, speculation, testimony



Chapter 2

Summary

John describes his mother, Tabitha (nickname Tabby). She dressed to accentuate her looks without showing them off and exuded a “touchability”—everyone who knew her wanted to touch her. He describes her response to this contact “catlike”—she froze, ducked, or luxuriated in it. He does not recall Tabby openly flirting, but posits she must have as she traveled on the train to Boston and back, as it was on this train that she met John’s father as well as Dan Needham, the man she eventually married. John recounts the night his mother told the family about her beau at the dinner table, reassuring her mother she was not once again pregnant and telling John the man is not his father. Tabby tells the family her new paramour is a drama teacher with a Harvard degree—a fact that impresses John’s grandmother—who is applying for a teaching job at Gravesend Academy. Just then, the doorbell rings and Dan Needham appears. John notes that the slightly disheveled, redheaded, young-ish man is different from the attractive young men his mother usually dates. And even more unlike his mother’s usual dates, Dan Needham does not act awkwardly towards John. Rather, he gives him a paper bag, instructing John not to open it and alert him if it moves. As the adults talk, John gives into temptation, opens the bag, and screams when he sees what he perceives to be a horrible monster. Dan laughingly tells Tabby that he knew John could not resist opening the bag. The “monster” turns out to be nothing but a taxidermied armadillo used as a prop during a lecture Dan gave at Gravesend as part of his successful interview. Dan reveals he has been hired as a history teacher at the Academy. He gives the armadillo to John, who cherishes it, as does Owen Meany. The two boys create a game where one hides the armadillo in the attic and the other must find it.

John’s narrative shifts to memories of childhood visits to see his Aunt Martha, Uncle Alfred, and their three children Noah, Simon, and Hester. The cousins intimidate John as they lead a more athletic life. He goes skiing with them; however, they are expert skiers and he is not. Hester, obsessed with sex and sexuality, warns him that if he continues to fall, he may make himself sterile. John, as the narrator, muses that his sex-obsessed cousin Hester became that way because of her familial environment. Her parents modeled gender roles, as her father was burly, rich, and masculine and her mother overly gentle and feminine. Combine her parents’ role modeling with her brother’s constantly beating her in games, John believes a slightly older more sexually aware Hester had no recourse but to intimidate all the girls her brothers brought home and have intercourse with all of the boys they, her brothers, ever knew. He recalls being forced to kiss Hester as punishment for losing a game, and then purposefully losing games afterwards. Owen expresses jealousy whenever John goes to visit his cousins and insists John leave the beloved armadillo behind. Owen takes the armadillo home in a box stuffed with cotton.



John's cousins come to Gravesend for Thanksgiving. John introduces them to Owen, scared of what they might do to the diminutive boy. The children play a game in which Hester hides and the others attempt to find her. The only rule is if Hester can grab the searcher's penis before he finds her, she wins. Owen finds Hester, and instead of grabbing his privates, she tickles him until he accidentally wets his pants. Owen, humiliated, flees the house forcing John and his mother to search for him. He promises to return only if he may take a bath and wash his clothing. The children devise a new game in which Hester hides Owen and the others must find him. Owen deems John's cousins to be okay, but lacking in direction.

After Owen's foul ball kills Tabby, John wakes up in his grandmother's house to see the Meany Granite Quarry Truck. He watches as Owen gets out of the truck and leaves a package on the doorstep. The box contains all of Owen's beloved baseball cards. John asks Dan Needham what Owen wants him to do with the cards. Dan tells him Owen wants him to give them back. John agrees, and gives Owen the cards plus their beloved armadillo as a means to express his continued love for his little friend. After keeping the armadillo for two nights, Owen returns it to John just as John returned the baseball cards. However, an outraged John discovers Owen has mutilated the taxadermied animal by removing its claws. Dan explains Owen must be commenting on the loss the three—John, Dan, and Owen—have suffered. An older, wiser John (as narrator) believes Owen Meany may also have been referring to the armless totem signature of Watahantowet which represented the idea that losing the land that became Gravesend was, to Watahantowet, like losing his limbs. John also believes Owen was trying to say God has a purpose, and that he is an instrument of God though not by choice.

As he writes his narrative in 1987, John says he has recently read a copy of Ronald Regan's State of the Union Address. He is not an admirer of Regan now, nor was he as a schoolboy in the 1960s when Regan was a Californian politician. John says Regan did not understand anything about the Vietnam War, but Owen Meany did and was critical of the United State's presence in Vietnam. John describes how by 1971 he had moved to Canada and applied for citizenship. He says Owen helped him evade serving in Vietnam and that Owen gave him more than he ever took (even considering his mother) but does not elaborate on the statement.

Analysis

Author John Irving delves further into his theme of sex and sexuality in this chapter. In addition to exploring the burgeoning sexuality of young male characters, Irving also comments on female sex and sexuality through the characters of Tabby and Hester. Tabby, John's mother, is depicted as feminine and motherly and thus perhaps the best model of female sexuality. She never overtly uses her sexuality to entice men. Hester, by comparison, recognizes her sexuality as a potential weapon to be used against her parents as well as men. This recognition seems to make Hester bitter and even resentful but does nothing but persuade her of the usefulness of sex as a weapon. With one woman, sex/sexuality is natural and positive, with the other is a negative force. This has a direct impact on the narrator, John, as a boy. In comparison to his rambunctious



cousins, John is unremarkable and perhaps even withdrawn. However, he develops a sexual curiosity and attraction to Hester. Hester's own budding understanding and employment of her sexuality is vastly different from what John has observed in his mother. His exploration of his own sexuality plays out through seemingly innocent childhood games—with each game he loses, he loses a bit of his childhood innocence.

The inclusion of John's modern day diatribe against Ronald Regan provides some insight into an older, more mature version of the narrator. His hatred for America foreshadows some event that caused him to become angry and bitter.

Vocabulary

luxuriate, slatternly, countenance, illegitimate, relic, imperious, conjugal, projectile, susceptible, diabolical, semblance, bastion



Chapter 3

Summary

In another recounting of a childhood memory, John revisits the time before his mother's death. He remembers a dressmaker's dummy she kept next to her bed and dressed in various outfits. Tabby possessed expert sewing skills and often bought clothes while in Boston, copied them, and then returned them. After her death, John and Dan often mistake the dummy for Tabby. John and Owen dress the dummy in Tabby's clothing; Owen frequently reconstructs actual outfits that Tabby wears. However, no one can convince her to wear a beautiful red dress (the only non-white or black outfit in her closet) in the back of her closet. She wears the dress once, during a production of *Angel Street* that Dan directs; Tabby played a wife driven mad by her evil husband. During a sleepover at John's house, Owen wakes up with a fever. He goes to tell Tabby, only to come rushing back to John's room claiming to have seen an angel. John goes to investigate, sees the silhouette of the dress dummy, and concludes during his fever-induced state, Owen hallucinated the angel. Owen, however, persists. After Owen's foul ball kills Tabby, he becomes increasingly vocal about his belief in predestination, or the concept that every action and person serves a fated purpose. Owen believes he disrupted an angel in Tabby's room and thus disrupted fate; John comes to realize Owen believes the angel he saw and disturbed in Tabby's room was not a guardian angel, but rather an angel of death. On the night of Owen's fever, Owen convinces Tabby to let him sleep in her bed. He vigilantly watches for the angel through the rest of the night. Mrs. Wheelwright barges into the room to scold her daughter for leaving the faucet running; Owen mistakes her for an apparition and shrieks waking the house and the neighbors. John describes how, years afterwards, Owen insists John's grandmother's response to his own scream was to wail like a banshee. Believing the description silly, John never gave it much credence until Dan Needham looked the phrase up and discovered the banshee's wail indicates a loved one's imminent death. Writing as an older man, John muses that perhaps Owen Meany was not as preposterous in his declaration as he, John, formerly believed.

Despite Tabby's affection for Dan and her family's acceptance of him, their courtship progresses slowly as it is four years before the two marry. The couple's respective churches compete to win the couple to their respective congregations. John prefers the Congregationalist minister, Reverend Merrill—a serious and educated man—to the Episcopalian, Bible-thumping ex-pilot Reverend Dudley Wiggin. Owen, unimpressed with Reverend Merrill, points out that a church leader should not openly express as much doubt in his faith as the Reverend does. Despite the community's adoration of Reverend Merrill and her own family's long-time involvement in the Congregationalist church, Tabby and Dan choose the Episcopalians. However, they hold their wedding at the non-denominational chapel at Gravesend Academy with the ceremony conducted by both Reverends. One year later, Tabby's funeral was held in the same chapel.



Post-nuptials, the wedding party retires to Mrs. Wheelwright's house. Cousin Simon tells Owen Meany his somber dark suit makes Owen appear as though he is attending a funeral. Hester defends Owen against her brother. In an attempt to avoid the long line to use the bathroom during the party, Hester urinates in the bushes. She hands Owen her panties; embarrassed, he stuffs them into his jacket pocket. Owen gifts the newlyweds with a granite marker from his father's tombstone factory with the month and year of their wedding inscribed upon it. A sudden hailstorm sweeps in as the couple prepares to leave. Owen, who the couple agreed to drop off at home on their way out of town, rides off with Hester's panties still in his pocket. Hester's unclothed state becomes apparent as it starts to rain, soaking her yellow dress.

Stepping away from his memories, John writes that Mr. Chickering, his Little League coach, now suffers from Alzheimer's disease. He remembers how Chickering, feeling responsible for Tabby's death, wept at his mother's funeral. John muses that if Harry Hoyt, the player walked before Owen batted, had been struck out Owen would have never gone to the plate. John reveals Harry was later killed in Vietnam, and in her grief, his mother became a war protester. The boy who rounded the bases on an error, did not attend the funeral nor did he go to Vietnam. Rather, he was declared psychologically unfit to serve because of his drug and alcohol abuse. He also dies but in a car accident caused by his own drinking.

John recalls on the day of Tabby's burial, her services were interrupted by the sounds of a nearby high school baseball practice. Many mourners covered their ears in dismay and Owen Meany once again repeated, "I'M SORRY! I'M SORRY!" Aunt Martha, Mrs. Wheelwright, and Dan each offer John a place to live; John decides to split his time between Dan's apartment and his grandmother's home. Hester informs John that Owen feels the loss of Tabby worse than John does. As they walk, John sees Owen praying over Tabby's grave, his father's Granite Company truck parked nearby. Owen tells John they must remove the dress dummy from the apartment, as it will make Dan miserable. John agrees, and Dan does not prohibit them from doing so; Owen decides he should keep the dummy himself. The dummy remains clothed in Tabby's special red dress.

John admits he has developed a belief in angels. However, this belief has not helped him much, as he failed to be elected to a parish office despite the number of offices he has held in the past. He finds himself increasingly irritated by the services, specifically the latest emphasizing the beatitudes of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. However, the Psalm about wrath affected him as he himself has felt wrath and been moved to do evil.

Analysis

While the story structure, to this point, resembles that of memoir, John has begun to shift the narrative focus to Owen Meany. Specifically, John has begun to write more thoroughly about Owen's religiousness and, though to a lesser degree, the effect of his friend's religious convictions about his own life. Owen persistently believes the things he sees are omens of his fate as God's instrument. His belief, for example, that the "angel" he saw looming over Tabby was not a guardian angel (as John initially thinks Owen



believes) but rather the Angel of Death—whom he disrupted, nonetheless—reinforces his belief in predestination and fate. Because he, Owen, prevented the Angel of Death from taking Tabby, it then falls to Owen to kill Tabby with the unlucky foul ball. Thus, the tragic event becomes more than just unlucky coincidence; it is fate. Here are planted the seeds of Owen's ideas of fatalistic faith that will continue to grow and drive the plot of the story: Owen believes everything is predetermined and everyone serves a purpose. More specifically, Owen believes he possesses knowledge of his own fate and understands how, why, and to what ends God will use him in his Master Plan.

Vocabulary

confederate, poignant, protrusive, wayward, coy, theological, rector, flamboyant, derisive, balk, repose, provincialism, talisman



Chapter 4

Summary

The first Christmas after Tabby's death is dreary. The Gravesend Wheelwrights do not go to Sawyer Depot (Aunt Martha's home) for the first time in John's memory; his grandmother claims it would make them all even sadder for Tabby. John and Owen use Dan's master key to explore the student dormitories while Dan is occupied with the Gravesend Player's production of *A Christmas Carol*. Owen and John are forced to participate in the church's production of the Christmas Story. Owen refuses to be forced to play, yet again, the Announcing Angel. John describes Reverend and Mrs. Wiggin's absurd approach to the annual Christmas Pageant as thus: the smallest children are dressed as turtledoves, the prettiest girl portrays Mary, and a large supply of infants are kept in the wings in case the child playing baby Jesus begins to fuss and cry. Snooping through the empty dormitories, the boys quickly learn where to look for hidden pornography; when they find it—and they always find it—Owen's opinion of the room's occupant changes. They discover a hidden stash of condoms; Owen cheerfully announces condoms are banned by the Catholic church as they take turns putting the prophylactics on their penises. John recognizes for Owen this as an act of rebellion against the church that hurled a still unknown insult against his parents.

During the casting of the Christmas pageant, Owen once again states that under no circumstances will he yet again portray the Announcing Angel. John finds himself cast as Joseph. Casting grinds to a halt, however, when no one steps forward to play the angel. But when an unfortunate boy named Harold Crosby tips his chair over backwards, Reverend Wiggins mistakes the accident for volunteering. Owen somehow convinces the Reverend, his wife, and the other children that he should play the Christ Child, as it would eliminate the need for babies backstage. He also argues, using lyrics from "Away in a Manager," the removal of the crib from the manager scene. When the Virgin Mary (played by Mary Beth Baird) is unsure how to show her affection for the Christ Child, Owen suggests she bow. The rector decides to keep this element in the play.

Mr. Fish, who is playing Scrooge in Dan's production of *A Christmas Carol*, stops by to complain about the poor performances of the other amateur actors. Even though Mr. Fish is John's next-door neighbor, John never knew Mr. Fish's occupation. Rather, Mr. Fish represented all small town neighbors, the kinds who maintain their lawn and play fetch with their dogs and other such mundane pastimes. John recalls the day Sagamore, Mr. Fish's dog, died. While playing football with Mr. Fish, Owen successfully punted the ball a long ways. Sagamore, true to his retriever nature, races after the ball and is struck by the diaper truck. The group buries Sagamore under Mrs. Wheelwright's bushes with Owen presiding over the ceremony. Reverend Merrill, out on a walk with his wife, stumbles upon the scene and seemingly loses his ability to speak. Owen steps in, reciting "I am the resurrection and the life...". John's mother, still alive at the time, takes Owen's hand.



John rarely visits Owen's house, though he does visit that Christmas Vacation. He notes the mutilated and incomplete nativity scene on the mantel. He accidentally mentions to Owen's parents that Owen is play the Christ Child and is perplexed by their seemingly stunned response. When John returns to the house for his hat, he finds Mrs. Meany, head bowed, in front of his mother's dressmaker's dummy, as though she were awaiting instructions. Mrs. Meany, speaking to John for the first time since he has known her, expresses sympathy for his mother's death. The boys pass under a railway trestle on their way home just as a train passes overhead. John believes it to be a lucky coincidence. Owen contradicts him, as he believes only in destiny.

John describes the new maids at his grandmother's house: sturdy and dim-witted Ethel has taken over Lydia's job post-leg amputation and flighty, frightened Germaine acts as maid to Lydia. Germaine believes in the supernatural and, as such, believes that Owen Meany's diminutive size indicates he can possess other people. All of this John learns during a dinner conversation about Owen's odd voice. It is revealed Tabby offered to give Owen her voice coach's contact information, and he refused. John informs his family that Owen does not intend to seek help to fix his voice as he, Owen, believes his voice comes from God and is part of God's plan. Mrs. Wheelwright scoffs and tells John Owen's voice comes from breathing in too much granite dust as a baby.

John and Owen catch Mr. Brinker-Smith and his beautiful young wife having sex in the dormitory during one of their explorations. They hide and are shocked by the pair's brazen display. Owen declares sex makes people crazy. When the individual playing the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come quits the play, Owen convinces Dan to recast the role, allowing Owen to play the pivotal role. Owen wows during rehearsal, earning respect from even Mrs. Wheelwright, as he is now both the Baby Jesus and the Ghost.

Analysis

Symbolically, Owen represents the tie between the natural (man) and the supernatural (God) and in Chapter 4, this representation takes on a new ironic meaning as Owen is chosen to portray Jesus and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. Irving foreshadows events pertaining to the as-yet unrevealed insult the Meanys suffered from the Catholic Church with the mutilated nativity scene and specifically the empty cradle. Owen's stoic belief in predestination is further illustrated by his refusal to undergo voice therapy, as he believes his voice has a role to play in God's fated plan. Ideas of sex and sexuality are further explored in this chapter and specifically the ways in which young boys become sexually aware. Now their curiosity has gone beyond breasts and kissing to a more explicit representation of the female form (pornography) and experimentation with their own sex organs. Their response to sex—Owen's disapproval, John's acceptance—seems contradictory to their sexual lives later in the novel as Owen seems to develop a sexual relationship with Hester, and John remains a virgin.

Vocabulary

bleak, boisterous, thwart, haphazard, prophylactic, nave, grotesque, crèche, tactile, unorthodox, harbinger, aesthetic, inconspicuous, conjugal, inexorable



Chapter 5

Summary

Owen's opening night performance in *A Christmas Carol* wins him rave reviews in the local paper; however, all Owen can focus on is the words used to describe his size. Owen develops a cold and Dan is somewhat elated, as a sniffing ghost may be less terrifying. John worries Owen's cold may affect his portrayal of Baby Jesus. Mr. Fish, whose own performance as Scrooge was overshadowed by Owen's turn as the Ghost, joins Owen and John as they make their way to the church on the morning of the Christmas pageant. He is not a regular churchgoer but is eager to see Owen perform once again. Owen demands that he be wrapped in his lucky scarf—a gift from Tabby—before he is wrapped in his swaddling costume. Barb Wiggins and Owen argue about the scarf, and ultimately Barb loses. As the children take their places, Barb first attempts to pinch some color into Owen's pallid cheeks and then kisses him on the mouth. Owen flushes with embarrassment and becomes aroused. Barb carries the baby Jesus out to the manager, fully aware of his erection, and continues to tease him. Owen regains control of himself as the pageant begins and his level malevolent gaze unsettles Barb Wiggins, who is in the process of lowering the Announcing Angel (played by rotund Harold Crosby). Poor Harold, dangling above the scene, forgets his lines and the only person who can help him—Owen Meany—whispers the lines the best he can in his broken voice. The play continues to spin out of control when the children clothed in animal costumes faint under the heat of the lights and Mary Beth Baird flops on top of Owen in a fit of emotion; Owen's only recourse to remove her from atop his body is to goose her. The perplexed crowd begins to murmur and only Owen's glare quiets them. It is then he sees his parents in the audience and sees his mother sobbing. Angered, he demands to know what they are doing in the church, prompting them to leave. Owen commands Mary Beth and John to carry him out of the church and to his waiting parents. The other children follow, and a sort of impromptu procession of Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and assorted animals proceeds out of the church and into the snow. Owen remarks it's good thing he wore his lucky scarf.

John breaks from his memories of the Christmas of 1953 to ruminate on a conversation he had with the rector of his current church regarding President Reagan's nuclear weapons policy. As John railed against America and Americans, the rector suggests that John may actually be upset about the vestry elections in which he received not even a single nomination. The rector explains John's frequent anti-American diatribes ironically strike many of the Canadian parishioners as truly American. John ignores the rector and continues to complain about the nuclear arms race; the rector tells John he lives in the past.

John dives back into his memories of 1953 recalling how upon reentering the church, he found it in a state of chaos and Mr. Fish excitedly—and with a certain amount of gleeful satisfaction—commenting on the primitivism of the production. As John retrieves his and Owen's clothing Fish notices poor Howard Crosby still dangling from the ceiling,



deserted by an enraged Barb Wiggin. As Dan lowers Howard back to solid ground, Barb informs John that Owen is not allowed back in the church unless he spoke to her first. Upset, and knowing that such a message would cause Owen to cease coming to church altogether, John tells Dan what she said. Angry, Dan reminds Barb that in her anger, she negligently left a young boy hanging in the air and reminds her she has no authority whatsoever in the church. He informs Barb he will forget her transgression if she leaves Owen alone; Barb agrees. Meanwhile, Mr. Fish congratulates Reverend Wiggin for such a creative performance.

On Christmas Eve, John escorts his grandmother to the final performance of A Christmas Carol. Backstage, John asks Owen about his behavior towards his parents at the Christmas pageant. Owen vaguely alludes to the insult from the Catholic Church, implying that the slight has something to do with his behavior. As the play opens, John recognizes a lot of the faces around him as people who attended that fateful Little League game. He suddenly remembers that right before his mother was struck, she first noticed then waved at someone in the stands; for a brief moment, John imagines it was his father before his attention returns to the play. Owen gives his usual upsetting performance until the moment he leads Scrooge—played by Mr. Fish—to the graveyard and reads the name from the grave marker. At that moment, Owen suddenly faints, coming to just before Dan closes the curtain. Owen leaps to his feet and screams, causing Mr. Fish to fall over into the mock grave. Mr. Fish attempts to soldier on but Owen, clearly shaken, refuses to approach the grave and darts off stage. John finds a sobbing Owen backstage who claims it was his own name inscribed on Scrooge's tombstone.

When John and Owen arrive back at the Wheelwright house, John immediately senses something wrong. They find Germaine sobbing and learn Lydia has passed away. Mrs. Wheelwright insists Owen's premonition was not of his own death, but rather Lydia's. Forced to sleep in a room with superstitious Germaine, John finds himself aroused by lust for the young maid. Unsure of this new feeling, John assumes it is something that comes from his unnamed father. Once Germaine falls asleep, John runs to the kitchen, calls Owen, and tells him what happened as well as his suspicions about his father. Owen agrees that perhaps Tabby was waving at John's father. He also agrees that John's newly discovered impulses may be inherited from his father and, as such, may help John discover his father's identity. What Owen does not agree with, however, is Mrs. Wheelwright's proclamation that it was Lydia's death he saw. He tells John he saw the whole thing. Realizing that Owen means he saw the date of his death, John asks what it was but Owen denies seeing any such information. This is the first time Owen has ever lied to John.

Analysis

Owen's connection to the supernatural—and his aura of otherworldliness—contribute to the main theme of Christian faith, thus it is no small coincidence that one of the most memorable sequence of events within the novel takes place during one of the most important Christian holidays. Owen is purposefully cast into the role of the Son of God,



adding not only to Owen's own belief that he is an instrument of God, but to the narrator and reader's belief as well. Ritual, foresight, and death all add to the weirdness of seemingly inexplicable occurrences within the chapter and, Owen Meany is at the center of all of these odd incidents.

Owen Meany's influence on John's religious beliefs becomes more apparent in this chapter as he admits Owen Meany's performance as the Christ Child has supplanted any church-related teaching of the Christmas Story. Specifically, Owen's furious questioning of his parents changes the story into a more poignant moment as the question, "WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING HERE?" somehow translates into mankind's eternal quest to understand its imperfect existence.

Sexuality continues to be a prevalent theme. Barb Wiggin provides another example of a woman using her sexuality to control and punish men and, as she is the Reverend's wife, ties sex and sexuality to spirituality. Even more so as Owen experiences arousal at the exact moment he assumes the role of the most holy man in all of Christianity. Owen's incredibly human response to Barb's caresses serves to remind the reader that despite his role as God's instrument, Owen is still very much human.

Vocabulary

penultimate, beneficiary, puckish, vestibule, deleterious, raiment, perfunctory, protrusion, plaintive, contemptuous, rapt, vociferously, eccentricity



Chapter 6

Summary

Mrs. Wheelwright decides to purchase a TV for her home despite years of resisting. John and Owen may watch whatever they wish, the only exception the Late Show as she believes they should maintain a reasonable bedtime. Mrs. Wheelwright, who watches the TV constantly, develops a habit of keeping up a scathing running commentary during all the shows; the boys find TV without this commentary boring. Both Owen and Mrs. Wheelwright develop an affinity for Liberace, who Mrs. Wheelwright claims is the only performer she can tolerate. John, however, finds this love of the flamboyant Liberace perplexing.

John and Owen are finally old enough to attend Gravesend Academy with Owen receiving a full scholarship to attend. Mrs. Wheelwright honors Tabby's wishes and agrees to purchase all of Owen's uniforms. When John is asked to spend a year in public school, Owen decides to spend a year with him so they will enter the academy in the same grade. Meanwhile, John's cousin Noah attends the academy and Hester visits. The boys are ready to enter the academy in 1957. In the meantime, they attend as many Gravesend Player's productions as possible in an attempt to remember who was in the stands the day Tabby was killed. Owen tells John every time he gets an erection to think if he reminds himself of anyone. John hoped for more visits from Hester now that her brothers attend the academy but, to his regret, she does not visit frequently. Owen reminds him that she is his cousin and beyond his reach.

John breaks from his narrative to comment that it is 1987 and Liberace has died. He notes that it is Palm Sunday and Owen always hated Palm Sunday. John returns to his narrative, jumping to the summer of 1958. First Owen and then, a month later, John obtains his driving license, which they use to drive to beaches to look at girls. John suddenly realizes girls are attracted to Owen; he is forceful and in command of social situations and has developed muscles from working in his father's quarries. The boys talk about physical attributes of their female classmates and Owen begins to smoke cigarettes.

The boys enter Gravesend Academy; Owen thrives academically and socially. He earns the nickname "the Voice" not because of his distinctive voice but rather the essays he writes for the student paper, *The Grave*. Owen's social status continues to rise and he invites Hester to the Senior Dance to the dismay of her brothers. They warn him about her slatternly ways; however, the two are inseparable at the dance. John is consumed with envy, which intensifies when Noah and Simon speculate as to whether or not Hester and Owen had sex after the dance. The school year ends; Owen continues to work in his father's quarry and John gives campus tours. In their free time they cruise the beaches for girls. Thugs and punks pick on Owen until he breaks the pinky finger of one. After that, he is considered untouchable. The boys return to the academy for their senior year. Owen gains more prestige and status as he is dating a college girl (Hester,



who is attending the University of New Hampshire). During the school year, Owen develops an interest in basketball, becoming obsessed with performing a slam-dunk. He convinces John to practice a move in which he, Owen, leaps for the basket, John catches him and raises to the rim so that he may complete a dunk. When John complains, Owen reminds him of the game the kids used to play in Sunday school. They spend all of Christmas break practicing the move as Owen insists it will be important to him/them later in life.

John once again breaks from his narrative to rail against Regan. He believes Regan flaunts his power and does not care about staying within the confines of the law. His thoughts turn to the difficulties of teaching Tess of the D'Urbervilles to twelfth graders. He recalls struggling with the novel in tenth grade and how Owen taught him to really read a book using Tess. He returns once again to his narrative, this time the winter of 1959. Reverend Merrill is now teaching religion at the academy. After a long search, a new headmaster, Randy White, is hired. Owen does not approve and uses his column, *The Voice*, to air his opinions. That summer the boys turn eighteen and, since they are eligible, they register for the draft. They continue to practice the basketball move or "THE SHOT" as Owen calls it. The boys once again return to school; Owen butts heads with the headmaster. He voices his opposition to Headmaster White's new authoritarian policies in his column and holds a mock Kennedy-Nixon election for his classmates. Owen's favored candidate, Kennedy, wins by a landslide; Owen predicts the real vote in November will be much closer. Headmaster White, a Republican, appoints himself faculty advisor of *The Grave* in order to keep an eye on Owen. Kennedy does indeed win. An elated Owen Meany is moved by Kennedy's "Ask not what you can do..." speech. Owen raises Kennedy to a sort of political and religious messiah. In 1987, an anti-Regan John agrees with Owen wholeheartedly.

Analysis

As John and Owen approach adolescence, their awareness of the world outside Gravesend expands. Politics and historical events of the 1960s become the backdrop to the story. It is no mistake that Irving chooses this moment in American history—the 1960s with its racial tension, Sexual Revolution, Vietnam War and polarizing politics—as the setting in which his characters come of age as many consider the 1960s to be a period when the nation lost its innocence. This loss will play out in narrative through characters'—specifically John's—loss of innocence.

John and Owen reach sexual maturity (or at least full awareness) at this point in the novel. Their sexual longings and thoughts are no longer foreign or frightening to them. They are able, for the most part, to control their urges. As John explores and forms his identity, Owen's own belief in who/what he is only strengthens, leading him to doggedly pursue seemingly meaningless exercises such as "The Shot."

Vocabulary

decrepit, inanities, decadence, androgynous, palimony, boorish, rendezvous, elocution, delinquent, curmudgeon, vestments, oligarchy



Chapter 7

Summary

While practicing “The Shot,” Owen reveals his intention behind removing the armadillo’s claws. Surprised by Owen’s admission, John drops Owen mid-shot. John thinks Owen is crazy for believing he is God’s instrument. The two continue to argue about it; however, after their argument they successfully complete “The Shot” in less than four seconds. Owen declares it just took a little extra faith. The boys also argue about college; John intends to attend the state university while Owen will likely receive a scholarship to attend an Ivy League school. Owen demands they stay together and John refuses to deny Owen the opportunity to better himself.

As part of their senior privileges, the boys travel to Boston by train two afternoons a week. While most students use this privilege to visit and drink with former Gravesend students attending Harvard, Owen forces John to visit a clothing store called Jerrold’s. The sign on the store matches the tag in Tabby’s red dress, the dress she claimed she got to keep because the store burned down. The owner of the store identifies a picture of Tabby as “The Lady in Red,” telling the boys she used to sing at a club in the ‘40s and ‘50s. Shocked that his mother lied to him, John allows Owen to steer him toward the home of Tabby’s singing teacher, Graham McSwiney. Owen approaches McSwiney under the ruse of wanting his vocal chords examined. McSwiney complies and diagnoses Owen with vocal chords frozen in the position of a constant scream. Owen tells the man God gave him those vocal chords for a reason and shows McSwiney a picture of Tabby. The vocal coach confirms the storeowner’s identification of Tabby and admits he did instruct her. He remembers she had a pretty voice but was a lazy student. He provides the boys with the name of the owners of a club, The Orange Grove, at which Tabby used to sing.

John’s interruption of his narration of the events of 1961 becomes more frequent and hostile. He longs for an invitation to a friend’s summer home. He equates politics with junk food: when eating a cheeseburger, he cannot focus on any other taste; the anger associated with what he reads or sees about politics equally blinds him from other pursuits. His anger persistently reminds him of Vietnam. He recalls the number of troops sent to and killed in Vietnam between 1961 and 1968. John finally receives an invitation to his friend’s summer home. Throughout John’s angry diatribes, he continues the story of his youth in the 1960s. Christmas 1961 Mrs. Wheelwright gifts Owen with a diary in which he begins to record his fatalistic prophecies. He does not share the diary with John at the time, but by 1987 John has read the diary. Owen continues to antagonize Headmaster White. Fellow student Larry Lish informs Owen that Kennedy has been carrying on a sexual relationship with Marilyn Monroe. Larry’s socialite mother Mitzy confirms the rumor and further upsets Owen. She taunts him until, just to stop her from talking, Owen sexually propositions her. She reports the incident to Mr. White who seizes upon it as an opportunity to expel Owen. Owen is saved from expulsion only via faculty support. However, White places him on probation with the understanding that



any further misstep will result in dismissal. As part of his probation, Owen endures sessions with psychologist Dr. Dolder whom Owen believes to be an idiot. Owen continues classes with Reverend Merrill and often discusses the afterlife with Merrill.

Owen's responsibilities as a scholarship student include acting as a waiter at one of the faculty tables in the dining hall. This forces him to arrive an hour before breakfast to help in the kitchen. One cold winter morning, Owen arrives to find his parking spot occupied by Dr. Dolder's Volkswagen Beetle. This is not an unusual occurrence; when Dolder drinks too much at parties hosted by the headmaster, he inevitably fails to move his car. An angry Owen Meany recruits the basketball team to move the car into the auditorium prior to the morning meeting. The headmaster discovers the prank before the meeting and asks a group of faculty to help him remove the car. However, they lack the basketball team's strength and, as they roll it from side to side, cause a great amount of damage. The car flips when Mr. White attempts to steer it down the stairs and the headmaster finds himself trapped upside down in the car. He is certain Owen had a hand in his humiliation and becomes more hostile toward the student. He finally exacts his revenge when Larry Lish is caught with one of Owen's fake IDs: Owen is expelled.

Owen contacts Mrs. Wheelwright to apologize for disappointing her as he considers her his benefactor. He asks her to make sure John and Dan attend the morning meeting the next day. Worried about Owen's college prospects as well as what he is planning, John and Dan spend the night searching for Owen to no avail. Upon their arrival at the academy the next morning, they discover Owen has managed to remove the large statue of Mary Magdalene from in front of the town's catholic school and bolt it to the stage in front of the podium. To accomplish this task, Owen had to remove the statues head and arms. A horrified Dan rushes to find Reverend Merrill in the hopes the reverend can intervene with the school on Owen's behalf. Dan finds Owen at Reverend Merrill's home; the boy asks that Merrill say a pray for him at the meeting. Dan finds it disconcerting that Owen begins to cry when Reverend Merrill asks him if he has had the dream again. Neither Dan nor John knows about the dream.

The maimed statue stuns the students into silence. The reverend carries out Owen's request and continues the prayer despite Headmaster Whites interruptions. Mr. White receives a vote of no confidence from the faculty and is summarily dismissed from his position. Even though he is not allowed to graduate from Gravesend Academy, his classmates honor Owen with signs and cheers. Owen completes his education at the public high school and wrangles an acceptance from the University of New Hampshire after Harvard and Yale placed restrictions on his scholarships. He also loses the scholarship to UNH and decides to pay for school by joining ROTC. In 1962, there are only 11,300 troops in Vietnam and none are in combat. John writes that if he had known the content of Owen's diary or dream, he would have prayed harder for his friend that day in the auditorium. He transcribes two passages from Owen's diary in which Owen acknowledges and discusses his own death. One passage includes the inscription Owen saw on Scrooge's tombstone: 1LT PAUL O. MEANY, JR.



Analysis

Chapter 7 is a crucial chapter in John's narrative as it illustrates the point of no return for Owen Meany. Owen's actions shut him off from one path—an elite education—and ensure that no other option is left to him but to begin the process of joining the Armed Forces (via ROTC training). The older John allays any suspicion readers may have of Owen's blind faith belief in God's plan by combining snippets from Owen's journal with foreshadowing—John knows Owen's fate, believes in Owen's belief in his destiny, yet is not ready to share it with the reader. It is also important to note that as the narrative nears its climax, older John—the man recounting the story in 1987—becomes increasingly agitated. This may be read as John steeling himself to recount a painful memory, one with which he still struggles to make sense. In fact, one may infer John still struggles to make sense of his own faith, let alone Owen's faith. For Owen, God speaks to and through him via dreams and visions. However, for doubters such as John or even Reverend Merrill, the lack of tangible proof of God contributes to their doubt. Owen contented if there were proof of God's existence, there would be no need to make a leap of faith and without that leap of faith there is no God.

Vocabulary

mediocre, inaugural, flamboyantly, hovel, memento, exasperating, provincialism, slovenly, eradicate, fatalistic, bouffant, alimony, desecration, beseech



Chapter 8

Summary

The summer of 1962 marks the first summer John and Owen spend apart as Owen works for his father and John works in his uncle's lumberyard. John's cousins fix him up with a number of local girls but John fails to lose his virginity. Meanwhile, Owen and Hester live in her apartment, a fact that distresses Aunt Martha a greatly. John finds spending time with Owen and Hester depressing as Owen continues to be fatalistic about his own death (he hopes to be shipped to Vietnam when he finishes ROTC) and Hester's rage lacks purpose and direction. She eventually becomes an anti-war protester.

1987 and John is vacationing with his friend. He enjoys spending time with her family but cannot break his addiction to newspapers or control his rage over the Reagan administration. He describes his early attempts of fitting in when he first arrived in Canada. John arrived in Canada during the Vietnam war but not as a draft dodger as he has, in some as of yet un-described way, managed to evade the draft. He over hears Katherine's husband call him a non-practicing homosexual, and though he scorns the term, he does not comment on his sexuality.

John and Owen write letters to each other during the summer. John takes Simon to the emergency room after he slices his calf. Another patient tells him that Marilyn Monroe has died; Owen describes Marilyn Monroe as being similar to America, "A LITTLE BREATHLESS, VERY BEAUTIFUL, MAYBE A LITTLE STUPID, MAYBE A LOT SMARTER THAN SHE SEEMED." Owen equates Kennedy's treatment of Monroe to the way politicians treat America. In the fall, Owen and John begin classes at the university. Owen's grades suffer as he puts all of his effort into ROTC while John, an English major, finds college work easier than course work at Gravesend Academy. The following summer—the summer of 1963—John works in Mr. Meany's monument shop making gravestones. Kennedy's assassination upsets Mrs. Wheelwright. Owen works to replace the statue he defaced. John asks Hester about Owen's dreams but all she tells him is she hates to watch Owen when he has the dream. As their college years progress, and more and more troops are sent to Vietnam, Hester's anger grows and Owen works hard to ensure a combat assignment. Owen and Hester argue frequently and a worried John secretly pays a visit to the ROTC leader to tell him he believes Owen is not emotionally stable enough to be sent to Vietnam. Owen tells John that he must go to Vietnam because he cannot make a judgment about the war until he has seen and experienced it. Post junior year, Owen attends Basic Training desperate to impress by finishing first in his group. However, his inability to jump over the obstacle course wall garners him a second place finish. He worries his physical performance may doom him to an administrative rather than combat role. John finds himself in a dangerous situation—his enrollment in graduate school defers his draft eligibility for only one year. Despite urging from family and friends to take the steps necessary to avoid the draft, John remains indecisive. The two friends continue to argue about Owen's



desire to go to Vietnam. Owen tells John he is destined to die there and as such, God wants him to go to Vietnam. He finally shares his dream with John: he will rescue Vietnamese children and die a hero in the arms of a nun.

Owen receives his orders post-graduation; he is to report to Fort Huachuca in Arizona and not Vietnam. The friends visit Sawyer Depot and then Canada. In Arizona, Owen wins over the commanding officer in the hopes the officer will aid him in his quest. In the meantime, he works as a Casualty Assistance Office, escorting the bodies of dead soldiers home to their family. John finishes his first year of grad school and receives orders to report to the draft board. Owen writes to John instructing him to ignore the letter and to wait for his arrival. Upon his arrival, Owen invites John to the monument shop where he tells him that he would not be happy in the army and should continue to study. He plies John with a significant amount of beer and reveals his plan to cut off John's finger with the saw used for etching tombstones. Owen reasons that John's lack of trigger finger would render him ineligible for service.

John, though terrified, consents. Owen tells him to stare into his eyes, that the blade is so sharp that John will not feel a thing until it is over, and that he loves him. Owen tells him to, "JUST THINK OF THIS AS MY LITTLE GIFT TO YOU."

Analysis

As John's narration approaches the climax, it continues to speed up, becoming fragmented—he skips between past and present as well as between events. This indicates the manner in which children's lives change and become faster paced as they approach adulthood. John's obsession with politics acts as an indicator of his current situation, emotional state, and frame of mind. John's rants allow the reader to draw correlations between John the author and John the character in ways that were not possible in the early portion of the narrative. John's obsession with headlines, despite his attempt to relax, is a clever use of foreshadowing.

Owen's amputation of John's finger solves one great mystery of the novel—how Owen helped John evade the draft—and extends the symbolism of amputation. Amputation not only symbolizes sacrifice (as in the case of the Sagamore Indian chief) but also indicates lack as one notices what is missing rather than what is not. In that sense, John's need to record the story of Owen Meany's sacrifice becomes a story of loss and specifically a life without Owen Meany.

Vocabulary

arduous, purgatory, colossal, lascivious, sadistic, eccentricities, conspicuous, insurmountable, phosphorescence, vernacular, genocide, deferment



Chapter 9

Summary

John writes that Hester is now a successful rock star, Hester the Molester. She plays hard rock and her videos air on music video channels. John detests her music, but his students love it. He sometimes chaperones girls from his school to Hester's concerts; Hester invites them backstage and inevitably informs the girls John is still a virgin. John reiterates he is not a non-practicing homosexual, but rather what has happened to him has simply neutered him. Hester, John writes, was damaged by Owen's death as she felt Owen abandoned her. John feels, however, that Owen has not abandoned him as Owen's spirit has visited John twice since his death. John felt a tiny hand catch him when he fell down the secret passageway stairs at the Wheelwright house. He hears Owen's distinctive voice telling him not to be afraid. When he emerges from the passage, the roots of his hair have turned white.

Mrs. Wheelwright died two weeks before her 100th birthday. She died watching television and Dan found her body with her thumb pressed down on the remote causing the channels to change endlessly. John visits Dan each August; during his last visit, Dan asks John to move back to Gravesend. He tells John Owen has been dead for twenty years and as such, it is time to forgive and forget. John says he cannot and changes the subject. Writing in 1987, Dan worries about a new faculty member, a woman who is a sexual bully and challenges his notions of literature. John recalls Hester vowed not to attend Owen's funeral. She tells Owen that she would marry him and follow him anywhere he chose, but refuses to attend his funeral if he insists on going to Vietnam. John attends the March on the Pentagon (1967) but feels detached from the experience; because of his amputated finger, there is no chance he will be called to serve. He feels the protesters act disingenuously, as he suspects most of them are afraid of being drafted rather than really interested in the politics.

John's memories bounce to the summer of 1968, the time immediately after Owen's death. He visits the Meanys to speak to Mr. Meany about funeral arrangements. John wants Reverend Merrill, Owen's friend, to perform the service. Mr. Meany guides John into Owen's room where a shocked John discovers that Owen attached Mary Magdalene's arms to Tabby's dress dummy. John searches for the baseball that killed his mother but fails to locate it. Mrs. Meany protests and Mr. Meany shares their family secret with John: the Meanys claim Owen was a virgin birth. The Catholic Church's great insult was not to believe the claim. Mr. Meany tells John he told Owen this when he was eleven, the same year Owen's foul ball struck and killed Tabby. Mr. Owen shows John the tombstone Owen made for himself six months prior to his death—it is inscribed with the precise date of Owen's death.

John discusses what he has learned with Reverend Merrill. The reverend disagrees with John's claim that Owen's knowledge of his own death is a miracle. Amidst their theological argument, John suddenly remembers seeing the reverend in the bleachers



that fateful day and suddenly feels Owen's presence. Reverend Merrill cries out, in Owen's distinctive voice, "LOOK IN THE THIRD DRAWER, RIGHT-HAND SIDE" as his hand yanks the drawer open. John sees the ball that killed his mother and knows immediately that he has found his long-lost father. Reverend Merrill admits the truth—he is John's father—and reveals that just before she was struck and killed, he prayed she would die. Tabby's death is what shattered his faith in God, as he believes he wished her dead and as a result, God has abandoned him. Sickened to learn this pathetic man is his father, John leaves with the baseball. That night, he retrieves his mother's dressmaker's dummy and he places it outside church. He hurls the baseball through the window, waking the reverend. The sleepy reverend mistakes the dummy for Tabby Wheelwright and falls to his knees, faith restored. The next day, a faithful man once again, Reverend Merrill delivers a moving and sincere eulogy for Owen.

A light shines through the hole left by the baseball and onto Owen's military medal. Mary Beth Baird asks John how it was possible Owen was as light as he was. Suddenly hit by the loss of his friend, John is unable to answer. John rapidly describes the events post-funeral: his move to Canada, Mrs. Meany's fiery death shortly after Owen's (she burns to death when his memorial flag catches on fire in her living room), and the demise of Mr. Meany's granite business which causes him to become a meter-reader. Mr. Meany wears Owen's medal on his chest everywhere he goes. Then, finally, John describes Owen Meany's death.

Owen invites John to Phoenix, shortly after the Fourth of July. A military mix-up involving the body of a soldier has detained Owen. John goes to meet Owen, unaware Owen believes in his own imminent death. John quotes from Owen's diary, noting the only thing that confused Owen was the place of his death; he was certain he was to die in Vietnam saving Vietnamese children. As he has not been deployed to Vietnam, Owen has begun to question the validity of his vision. The friends spend a few days together, drinking beer, swimming, and meeting the family of the dead soldier, including Dick Jarvits, the dead soldier's machete toting fifteen-year-old brother who declares he lives for the day he can enlist and go to Vietnam. Major Rawls—Owen's Phoenix contact—drives them to the airport for John's departure. Owen spies a group of nuns and Vietnamese children disembarking from a plane. The nuns ask Owen to take the male children to the bathroom; he complies and John accompanies him. Dick Jarvits suddenly appears in the doorway, grenade in hand. Owen instructs the children, in Vietnamese, to lie down. Dick tosses the grenade and John catches it. Owen asks John if he understands now why they relentlessly practiced "The Shot." Owen leaps into the air as John tosses him the grenade. John catches Owen, lifting him up just as they have practiced. Owen, dangling from the ledge of the window, pins the grenade between his arms. The grenade detonates, destroying John's eardrums and severing Owen's arms just below the elbows. Owen's body is flung into the sink on the opposite side of the room. Jarvits flees the scene, pursued by Major Rawls and is killed with his own machete. A nun cradles Owen as he bleeds to death. He makes Major Rawls promise to get him a medal for his actions. Owen's last words to John are "YOU'RE GETTING SMALLER, BUT I CAN STILL SEE YOU." Owen gets his medal and John finally understands Owen's belief that he is an instrument of God. If not for his small size and odd voice, so similar to their own, the children would not have trusted him. John



believes that Owen Meany was a miracle and thus proof that God exists. However, this new knowledge does not mitigate his loss, as John continues to ask God to give Owen back.

Analysis

Doubt, and specifically debunking doubt, is a central theme in the final chapter of the novel. Both John and Owen's parentage is revealed; Owen's supposed virgin birth is met with doubt whereas the doubt over John's father is alleviated. Both John and Reverend Merrill's disbelief that Owen is a virgin birth, while logical, poses an interesting dilemma that is succinctly highlighted by Mr. Meany's articulation of an important problem associated with religious faith: if the miracle of one virgin birth is believable, why not a second? John's own disbelief vanishes when Owen performs his miracle and saves the Vietnamese children. It is this display of faith that shapes the rest of John's life (his move to Canada, his inability to forgive, etc.); moreover, Owen's sacrifice makes John a true believer once again. However, it is important to note that not all conversions or returns to faith are based on truly miraculous events. Reverend Merrill's return to his faith, for example, is prompted by the false miracle of Tabby's return. John's prank essentially allows the reverend to forgive himself for his imagined role in Tabby's death. The reverend, ironically, is more willing to believe a false miracle rather than the miracle of Owen's momentary possession of his body. Additionally, when John claims Owen helped him regain his faith he still exhibits moments of doubt. His "rummage-sale" approach to faith, for example, indicates his inability to accept God's plan.

Vocabulary

righteousness, curmudgeonly, neuter, epaulet, tedium, nostalgia, mayhem, parochialism, virulent, fervently, gossamer



Characters

John Wheelwright

John Wheelwright is the narrator of the novel and Owen Meany's best friend. John comes from an old aristocratic family of Gravesend, New Hampshire. He is the son of Tabitha (Tabby) Wheelwright and Reverend Merrill, though he does not discover the identity of his father until the end of the novel. John is missing his right index finger; Owen Meany amputated it in order to prevent John from being drafted. John narrates the story of his childhood and the rebirth of his religious faith in the '50s and '60s in 1987 from his home in Canada. He often interrupts the narrative with anti-Reagan/American government rants. John remains a virgin for the duration of the novel.

Owen Meany

Owen Meany is a dwarf with oddly incandescent skin and high, broken voice (written in all capital letters). Owen Meany is the hero of the story. He is the son of a quarry miner and owner and his deranged wife. His father claims that he was a virgin birth, just like Jesus. Owen believes he has received signs (dreams and visions) from God that he is fated to play an important role in God's plan. Owen is intelligent and charismatic and easily manipulates the adults around him. Owen symbolized the connection between the natural (earthly) and supernatural (spirit) worlds.

Tabitha "Tabby" Wheelwright

Tabby Wheelwright is John's beautiful mother. She is struck and killed by Owen Meany's foul ball during a Little League game. She represents a model of a pure and virtuous woman and is the model mother.

Mrs. Harriet Wheelwright

Harriet Wheelwright is John's formidable grandmother. She adheres to old standards of propriety. She is a descendant of John Adams and married into the Wheelwright family—one of the founding families of Gravesend, New Hampshire. She helps to raise John after his mother's death.

Dan Needham

As John's stepfather, Dan Needham provides John with the stability and love he needs after his mother's death. Dan, a Harvard graduate with theater training, directs the Gravesend Player's in various productions. John spends half his time at Mrs.



Wheelwright's house, and half his time at Dan's apartment at Gravesend Academy, where Dan teaches history.

Character 6

Reverend Louis Merrill is the Congregationalist minister and John's biological father. Despite his office, Reverend Merrill is plagued by religious doubt. He befriends Owen Meany and the two often engage in deep and serious theological discussions.

Hester Eastman

Hester is John's only female cousin. She grows into a bitter and angry young woman because of what she perceives as unequal treatment from her parents. John feels a sexual attraction towards her. She later falls in love with Owen Meany. Hester uses sex and her sexuality as a weapon against men. By the close of the novel, Hester has become a successful rock star known as Hester the Molester—a nickname her brothers gave her when they were children.

Dick Jarvits

Dick Jarvits is the dim-witted, emotionally unstable, and violent fifteen-year old brother of a dead Vietnam veteran. Owen and John meet him when they deliver the dead soldier's body to his family. Dick Jarvits is the instrument of Owen's death.

Reverend Dudley Wiggin and Barb Wiggin

The Wiggins preside over the Episcopal church. They preside over the doomed Christmas pageant of 1953. Reverend Wiggins is a former pilot and Barb Wiggins a former stewardess. Reverend Wiggins prefers the more outlandish verses from the Bible. Barb Wiggins detests Owen Meany and uses her feminine wiles intentionally to give Owen an erection just before his entrance in the pageant.

Headmaster Randy White

Owen Meany makes an enemy of Headmaster White when he criticizes his administrative policies. Headmaster White tries twice to and succeeds once in expelling Owen Meany. Owen retaliates and the Headmaster loses his job.

Lydia, Ethel, and Germaine

Lydia, Ethel, and Germaine are Mrs. Wheelwright's maids. Lydia develops cancer and must have her leg amputated. Mrs. Wheelwright continues to care for Lydia, hiring Ethel



to replace her and Germaine to take care of her. Lydia, in her later years, begins to take on attributes of her former mistress. Ethel is stodgy and slow-witted and young Germaine is skittish and superstitious.



Objects/Places

Gravesend, New Hampshire

Gravesend is John and Owen's small-town hometown. The reader is lead to believe Gravesend is, or at least once was, a mildly economically successful town. The town is an old town able to trace its roots back to early colonization. John's ancestor, John Wheelwright (for whom he is named) bought the land from a Native American tribe, the Sagamores. Chief Watahantowet signed the land over with an armless totem.

Object/Place 2

Sawyer Depot is a town in northern New Hampshire where the Eastmans—John's cousins—live. John visits during the summers and Christmas. Owen Meany longs to visit Sawyer Depot and finally does near the end of the book.

Armadillo

When John firsts meets Dan, Dan presents him with the armadillo. A former stage prop, it becomes a prized possession. Owen and John make a game of hiding the armadillo. When Owen gives John his prized baseball card collection as an apology and sign of remorse for accidentally killing Tabby, John returns the cards with the armadillo as a sign of his love and understanding. Two days later, Owen returns the armadillo but not in the same condition as he received it: he has amputated its feet.

Baseball/Foul Ball

The Little League game in which Tabitha Wheelwright is struck by a foul ball and killed, signifies both a rite of passage as well as the beginning of the loss of innocence for Owen and John. Little League is something that nearly all children partake of and symbolizes childhood. The foul ball, however, robs both Owen and John of normal childhood—Owen because he carries the pain of killing his mother figure and John because he suffers the loss of his actual mother. The foul ball mysteriously disappears after it strikes Tabby and it is not until many years later that it—and the identity of John's biological father—are revealed.

Dressmaker's Dummy

Tabby makes all of her own clothing using a dressmaker's dummy. John believes that sick and fevered Owen mistakes the dummy for an angel. When Tabby dies, Owen asks to take the dressmaker's dummy. He keeps it in his room. After Owen's death, John discovers Owen has attached the mutilated arms of the statue of Mary Magdalene to



the dummy. He reasons this bizarre item, in some way, reminds Owen of Tabby. When the dressmaker's dummy has served its purpose in helping Reverend Merrill rediscover his fate, John takes it to the ocean and pitches it in.

“The Shot”

“The Shot” is a move that Owen and John practice relentlessly in an effort to complete it in under four seconds. It involves John tossing a basketball to Owen, who jumps up into the air. John then catches Owen and hoists him up into the air as far as he can so that Owen can slam-dunk the basketball. They later use this move to save the Vietnamese orphans.

Object/Place 7

Owen defaces the Catholic Church's statue of Mary Magdalene, removing her head and her arms, and welding it to the podium at Gravesend Academy in retribution for his expulsion. In the Bible, Mary Magdalene is a prostitute who becomes one of Jesus' most beloved disciples. She stays with his body after the crucifixion and is the first to see him rise from the dead. Therefore, Mary Magdalene becomes a sort of symbol by which Owen communicates to the headmaster. Owen also uses the statue's arms to create a sort of pseudo-Tabby in his bedroom.

Phoenix, Arizona

Phoenix, Arizona is the city of Owen Meany's death. It is here that he and John save the Vietnamese orphans, and not Vietnam as Owen originally thought. The phoenix is also a mythical bird that is reborn as it rises from its own ashes.



Themes

Religion & Doubt

The most prevalent theme within *A Prayer for Owen Meany* is the relationship between religion and doubt. Owen represents those with faith, John those who want to believe, and Reverend Merrill those who have lost or begun to doubt their faith. Owen believes that every being on Earth has a purpose and is part of God's plan. From the age of eleven onward, Owen believes that he receives communications from God depicting the exact way in which he is fated to serve as part of God's plan. When he shares bits and pieces of this with John, such as explaining his mother's death, John fails to believe Owen and perhaps rightfully so as many of Owen's visions seem to be coincidental. For example, a sick and feverish Owen Meany just happens to see an angel of death hovering over Tabby in the general vicinity of where Tabby keeps her dress dummy. Yet Owen steadfastly clings to his belief and, in the end, is perhaps vindicated when all of his odd behavior results in the rescue of Vietnamese orphans.

From the beginning, John maintains it is Owen who helped him become a true believer; yet, despite himself, he remains doubtful. The first indicator of John's doubt is his admission that his approach to religion resembles that of a rummage sale—he's worked his way through multiple churches picking and choosing from each what suits him best. Despite what he has witnessed and experienced via Owen's death, John remains unable to accept the fact events unfold according to God's plan, as evidenced by his rampages against the Regan administration as well as his plea to God to return Owen Meany. In a similar manner, Reverend Merrill's doubt is not only all-consuming, but also refuses to allow him to believe in the miracles that he sees happening around and to him. Even Merrill's possession by Owen cannot banish his doubt. The irony of Reverend Merrill's doubt is that it is created, in essence, by his faith; he believes his wish for Tabitha's death was answered and, as a result, God turned away from him. Perhaps even more ironically, Reverend Merrill's faith is restored not by the miraculous events happening around and to him, but through John's prank. In both characters' cases, they ignore Owen's plea to "just have a little faith" and instead, in an effort to bolster their own belief, look for quantifiable proof—perhaps Owen's resurrection, as both plead for God to give him back—of the existence of a higher power.

Sex/Sexuality

Sex and sexuality play an important role in the novel. Owen, John, and Hester come of age during a period of American history that includes Vietnam, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Sexual Revolution. John's education and understanding of sex and sexuality begin at an early age. He acknowledges his mother is a beautiful woman but makes a distinction between beauty and sex appeal. His mother, while a sexual being, does not flaunt her sexuality. John posits that she must, at some point, have flirted with men but she never flirts in front of the boys. Rather, she is a Madonna-like role model of



motherhood. In comparison, nearly every other woman in the novel—Barb Wiggins, Hester, etc.—uses their sexuality to manipulate and punish. Barb Wiggins manages to, despite Owen's loathing of her, cause Owen to achieve an erection and Hester uses sex with random and often inappropriate men to punish her parents and, to a lesser extent, her brothers. Throughout the novel, the boys evolve from children who don't understand physical and emotion urges women's body produce in them to sexual beings who engage—or at least pursue—in sex with women. It is implied that Owen has sex with Hester, and John recounts numerous times he unsuccessfully attempts to lose his virginity before deciding that anything worth losing is worth keeping. There is some evidence, despite his protestations, that perhaps John suppresses homosexual tendencies. However, John maintains he is not homosexual, or even sexual for that matter, but rather exists in a neutered state because of what he has experienced.

Armlessness

While not wholly a theme, but rather a motif, armlessness and amputation is prevalent throughout the novel and vitally important to understanding the story. The first instance of armlessness within the novel exists within John's narrative of his ancestor's purchase of Gravesend from Watahantowet. Legend states that unable to read, Watahantowet signed the papers with an armless totem. Owen's removal of the armadillo's feet in a gesture meant to refer symbolically to Watahantowet's totem. Additionally, Tabby's dressmaker's dummy is both headless and armless and Owen removes the head and arms from the Catholic's statue of Mary Magdalene. Armlessness, as a symbol, evolves over the course of the novel. At first, armlessness is unacceptable. When Owen returns the mutilated armadillo, John is furious as the armadillo is now ruined, as it cannot stand upright. This, in some sense, represents the emotions Dan, Owen, and John experience when Tabby dies; they are unsure how to "stand" on their own, much like the armadillo could not stand with its feet amputated. By the end of the novel, armlessness comes to represent the concept that nothing comes without a price. Watahantowet may have made money on the land deal with John Wheelwright, but in exchange for wealth loses the sacred lands of his people. Similarly, Owen may have saved the Vietnamese orphans, but the amputation of his arms results in the loss of his life. As John points out, amputation signifies loss, as one notices what is NOT there rather than what is.

Owen's understanding and use of armlessness and amputation offers a different view: it is a sacred condition. When he gives the clawless armadillo back to John, he means to say "GOD HAS TAKEN YOUR MOTHER. MY HANDS WERE THE INSTRUMENT. GOD HAS TAKEN MY HANDS. I AM GOD'S INSTRUMENT," which is the foundation of Owen's faith. Owen, in other words, believes that every event is part of God's plan and people are just instruments used to carry out that plan. In this sense, armlessness is more figurative than literal and indicates an helplessness to the will of God, but not the injustices of the world, as the injustices are not contrary to God's will.



Style

Point of View

Narrative Voice

The story is told in first person point of view; John is a middle-aged man who had decided to write a sort of memoir. However, the narrative does not progress in perfect chronological order. Rather, John pieces the story together as he sees fits, often bouncing back and forth between present day and past memories. The first person perspective is conversational and accessible—readers feel as though they are listening to a friend. John presents an interesting conundrum in regards to his reliability. On the one hand, his narration of his childhood and depiction of Owen Meany is unflinching—there are times when John admits he is jealous or loves Owen and makes no excuse for moments in which Owen acts badly. However, there are also moments where John elevates Owen to an almost god-like status. Additionally, John becomes ambiguous in regards to his understanding of specific situations and thus, at times, does not provide the reader with enough insight.

Setting

The novel is set in two different times and places—1987 Toronto, Canada and 1950s and 1960s New Hampshire. While the narrator takes great pains to describe the setting of Gravesend, New Hampshire—the town where he grew up—he spends very little time describing his adult life surroundings.

Language and Meaning

The language is slightly elevated though not difficult to understand. The narrator is an educated man who holds an elevated degree, and as such, makes elevated word choices. This, however, is tempered by the fact the narration is conversational in tone.

Structure

A Prayer for Owen Meany is broken into nine titled chapters. The initial chapters lack distinct chronology as they skip between different memories as well as between John's present time (1987) and John's past. However, by Chapter 4, the novel settles into a more linear narrative. Chapter 4 also exhibits a shift in narrative tone; to this point, the story exhibits a somber tone with the story of Tabby's death ever in the forefront. After this point, the narrative takes on a jocular and comedic tone. It is also at this point that Owen Meany's story takes precedence over John's narrative. As the climax of the story nears, the narrator returns to the scattered structure of earlier chapters in an effort to foreshadow the penultimate moment—Owen's death—as well as build tension.



Quotes

I am doomed to remember a boy with a wrecked voice—not because of his voice or because he was the smallest person I ever knew, or even because he was the instrument of my mother’s death, but because he is the reason I believe in God. I am a Christian because of Owen Meany. (chapter 1)

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 he took my mother. (chapter 2)

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. (chapter 3)

I meant that it was a farfetched piece of luck that had landed us under the trestle bridge precisely at noon, but Owen smiled at me with his especially irritating combination of mild pity and mild contempt. Of course, I know now that Owen didn’t believe in coincidences. Owen Meany believed that ‘coincidence’ was a stupid, 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. (chapter 4)

I was ashamed of how I felt. In the considerably grown-up vocabulary that I had been exposed to through my grandmother and Lydia, I had not been exposed to lust; that was not a word I could have learned from them—that was not a feeling I could label. What I was experiencing simply felt wrong; it made me feel guilty, that part of myself was an enemy to the rest of myself, and that was when I thought I understood where the feeling came from; it had to come from my father. It was the part of him that stirred inside me. And for the first time, I began to consider that my father might be evil, or that what he himself had given to me was what was evil in me. (chapter 5)

Whatever had been her actual experience with the black boatman from Tortola, the encounter had lent to Hester’s recklessly blooming young womanhood a measure of restraint that women gain from only the most tragic entanglements with love; in addition to her dark and primitive beauty, and a substantial loss of weight that drew one’s attention to her full, imposing bosom and to the hardness of the bones in her somber face, Hester now held herself back just enough to make her dangerousness both more subtle and absolute... her body belonged in the jungle, covered only essentially, possibly with fur or grass. (chapter 6)

Americans got bored with hearing about Vietnam before they got out of Vietnam; Americans got bored with hearing about Watergate, and what Nixon did or didn’t do—



even before the evidence was all in. Americans are already bored with Nicaragua; by the time these congressional hearings on the Iran-contra affair are over, Americans won't know (or care) what they think—except that they'll be sick and tired of it. After a while, they'll be tired of the Persian Gulf too. They're already sick to death of Iran. (chapter 7)

I don't think that Owen was angry, not exactly. But they shared a sense of some unfairness; there was an atmosphere of injustice that enveloped them both. Owen felt that God had assigned him a role that he was powerless to change; Owen's sense of his own destiny—his belief that he was on a mission—robbed him of his capacity for fun. (chapter 8)

When we held Owen Meany above our heads, when we passed him back and forth—so effortlessly—we believed that Owen weighed nothing at all. We did not realize that there were forces beyond our play. Now I know they were the forces that contributed to our illusion of Owen's weightlessness; they were the forces we didn't have the faith to feel, they were the forces we failed to believe in—and they were also lifting up Owen Meany, taking him out of our hands. (chapter 9)

O God—please give him back! I shall keep asking You. (chapter 9)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

What do you think of John Wheelwright as a narrator? Is he reliable or unreliable? Why? What is his motivation for telling this story twenty years after the death of Owen Meany?

Topic 2

Does Owen, as John claims in the very beginning of the novel, give him back his faith or, as the last line of the novel suggests, does Owen Meany—specifically the loss of Owen Meany—leave left John a broken man? Explain your answer using examples from the text.

Topic 3

Undoubtedly, Owen Mean is the central character of the novel. Is Owen always a likeable character? Why or why not? Provide examples from the text to support your analysis.

Topic 4

What roles do women assume in the novel? In what ways are women portrayed positively? In what ways are they portrayed negatively? Are some female characters more sympathetic than others are? If so, in what ways? What do you make of Hester Easton—is she a positive or negative character? Why? How do various female characters effect the development of Owen Meany and John Wheelwright?

Topic 5

From the moment his foul ball strikes Tabby Wheelwright dead, Owen's role as an instrument of God is linked with death. Does Owen's close relationship with death to support or undermine his miraculous purpose? How/why or why?

Topic 6

Faith and doubt are coupled together throughout the novel—some characters exhibit extreme faith (Owen Meany), while other profess to have faith yet still struggle with doubt (John), and yet others despite their religious occupations, exhibit extreme doubt in their faith (Reverend Merrill). Can faith exist without doubt or does one strengthen the other? How? Why or why not?



Topic 7

John relies heavily on foreshadowing throughout the story; he uses both symbolism as well as verbal cues to create foreshadowing. In what ways does the foreshadowing prepare you for Owen Meany's death?

Topic 8

Why might the title of the novel be A Prayer for Owen Meany?

Topic 9

Owen's belief that he is an instrument of God develops shortly after his parents tell him that he, like Christ, was a virgin birth. What effect may this revelation have had on Owen's ideas of predestination?