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A Prayer for Owen Meany
BY JOHN IRVING


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Name: _____

Date: _____

All references come from the Ballantine edition of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, published by The Random House Publishing Group, 1989.

Pre-reading

Critical Thinking/Theme

Objective: Preparing to read and critically analyze a literary text

In *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, the protagonist is a dwarf with underdeveloped vocal chords. Thus, he is a little person with a startlingly childlike voice, and his presence attracts attention.

Activity

Using the Internet or other appropriate reference material create a project about dwarfism. Select one of the following:

- Poster
- PowerPoint presentation
- Research paper

Your project must address each of the following issues.

- What is dwarfism?
- Is dwarfism considered a disability?
- How many types of dwarfism are there?
- What is the most prevalent type of dwarfism?
- Has society changed to be more inclusive of little people since the 1960s? If so, how?
- Does the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 address the problems confronting little people? If so, how?

Name: _____

Date: _____

Chapter 1–The Foul Ball**Setting**

Objective: Recognizing how an author's choice of setting lends verisimilitude to a literary text

Activity: Setting List and Gist

In pairs, compile a list of the settings where events unfold in this chapter. Cut out pictures and words from magazines to illustrate each location on the list. Assemble these on a poster board. Each set of students will display their collage to the class, while the class attempts to identify as many locations as possible. Afterwards, identify each location and explain its significance to the story.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Chapter 3–The Angel**Symbolism/Motifs**

Objective: Recognizing recurring symbols and themes in a literary text
Understanding how the use of symbolism lends meaning to a literary text

Activity

In small groups, compile a list of eight to ten symbols from the novel thus far. Interpret the meaning of each symbol. Begin with the title of this chapter, and remember that each symbol may represent more than one idea.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Chapter 4–The Little Lord Jesus**Point of View**

Objective: Recognizing how an author uses perspective to lend impact to a narrative

Activity: Death Perception

In a *Prayer for Owen Meany*, Irving uses John to narrate the events relating to Owen's miraculous life. John sees the events objectively. The narrative would have a different tone if it were from Owen's point of view. Rewrite the following paragraph from Owen's point of view.

“As never before, this question seemed to seize the attention of every amateur among The Gravesend Players; even Mr. Fish appeared to be mortally interested in the answer. But the midget Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come was inexorable; the tiny phantom's indifference to the question made Dan Needham shiver.

It was then that Mr. Fish approached close enough to the gravestone to read his own name thereon. ‘Ebenezer Scrooge...am I that man?’ Mr. Fish cried, falling to his knees. It was from the perspective of his knees—when Mr. Fish's head was only slightly above Owen Meany's—that Mr. Fish received his first full look at the averted face under the hood. Mr. Fish did not laugh; he screamed.” (Pg. 197-198)

Name: _____

Date: _____

Chapter 6–The Voice

Tone

Objective: Relating style to tone/Identifying the authorial attitude toward a literary text
Recognizing that the tone of a text may change throughout, according to the attitudes of characters

Activity

Note Irving's use of formal diction and connotative words, as John Wheelwright remembers Owen's reputation as The Voice. With his word choice, Irving conveys a gentle almost parentally chiding tone. "Gravesend Academy embraced a cynical tone of voice, savored a criticism of everything that anyone took seriously; the students hallowed, above everyone else, that boy who saw himself as born to break the rules, as destined to change the laws. And to the students of Gravesend who thus chafed against their bonds, the only accepted tone was caustic—was biting, mordant, bitter, scathing sarcasm, the juicy vocabulary of which Owen Meany had already learned from my grandmother." (Pg. 288) Reread the following excerpt from Owen's column. Analyze the tone of the passage by answering the questions that follow.

"AT THE RISK OF SOUNDING *PRURIENT*, I SHALL REVEAL THE SHOCKING NATURE OF THESE TWO SINS AGAINST THE SCHOOL AND WOMANKIND. ONE! A BOY WAS FOUND 'FONDLING' HIS DATE IN THE TROPHY ROOM OF THE GYM: AS THE COUPLE WAS FULLY DRESSED—AND STANDING—AT THE TIME, IT SEEMS UNLIKELY THAT A PREGNANCY COULD HAVE RESULTED FROM THEIR EXCHANGE; AND ALTHOUGH THE GYM IS NOTORIOUS FOR IT, I'M SURE THEY HADN'T EVEN EXPOSED THEMSELVES SUFFICIENTLY TO RISK AN ATHLETE'S FOOT INFECTION. TWO! A BOY WAS SEEN LEAVING THE BUTT ROOM IN BANCROFT HALL WITH HIS TONGUE IN HIS DATE'S EAR—AN ODD AND OSTENTATIOUS MANNER IN WHICH TO EXIT A SMOKING LOUNGE, I WILL AGREE, BUT THIS DEGREE OF PHYSICAL CONTACT IS ALSO NOT KNOWN TO RESULT IN A PREGNANCY. TO MY KNOWLEDGE, IT IS EVEN DIFFICULT TO COMMUNICATE THE COMMON COLD BY THIS METHOD." (Pg. 295)

1. Is this passage amusing?
2. Does the humor come from topic or language, or both?
3. Does Owen use verbal irony?
4. What attitude does he convey toward his audience?
5. What attitude does he convey toward his subject?
6. Why does Irving capitalize Owen's words throughout the novel?
7. Does Owen use connotative or denotative meanings of words?
8. Does Owen use satire?
9. Is Owen attacking someone?
10. Is Irving using Owen to make his attitude clear?