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Literature
Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



A Prayer for Owen Meany

by John Irving

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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Objectives

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

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

Questions for Essay and Discussion

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

Chapter 1 – The Foul Ball

VOCABULARY

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

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

2. Briefly describe Owen Meany.

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

4. Why is Johnny both crazy about and terrified of his cousins? How does he feel about Hester? Find an instance of hyperbole in Irving's description of water skiing.

5. Johnny writes:

Privately, I continue to be more forgiving of Hester than her own family is. I think she was up against a stacked deck from the start, and that everything she would become began for her when Noah and Simon made me kiss her—because they made it clear that kissing Hester was punishment, the *penalty* part of the game; to have to kiss Hester meant you had lost.

6. Why is Johnny afraid to introduce Owen to his cousins? In what sense are Owen and the armadillo linked?

7. Why does Hester scream when she first sees Owen?

8. Find a passage in this chapter that illustrates the image of Owen as a Christ-like figure.

9. What evidence is there that Owen might feel some sexual attraction to Hester?

Chapter 4 – The Little Lord Jesus

VOCABULARY

appellation – a name or title
curmudgeon – ill-mannered, bad-tempered person
dirgeful – sad music; like a funeral hymn
facetiousness – humor
fastidious – very refined; exceptionally clean
literal – based on the actual words; not figurative or symbolic
orthodoxy – sticking to established doctrines
procrastinate – to put off doing something until a future time
tremulous – trembling or quivering

1. Where does Johnny decide to live after his mother’s death? What is the adult narrator’s opinion of Christmas?

2. List the changes Owen wants to make in the traditional Christmas pageant and the reason he thinks each change is important.

3. What is Owen’s definition of a happy boarder at the Academy? Why does he think that dormitories are evil? What are Owen and Johnny really searching for when they go through the dormitory rooms?
