

A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

LIVING LITERATURE SERIES

JOHN IRVING

A PERMA-BOUND PRODUCTION

TEACHER'S GUIDE

GUIDE WRITTEN BY MARY ELLEN SNODGRASS

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SYNOPSIS

[Note: This chapter-by-chapter summary reflects Irving's blend of past and present as the central intelligence copes with compelling memories of his old friend.]

- 1. The Foul Ball** An upstanding, moneyed New Englander descended from John Adams, John Wheelwright is haunted by the memory of Owen Meany, his working-class friend with the damaged voice. John and his mother, Tabitha "Tabby" Wheelwright, live with her mother, Harriet Bates Wheelwright. On her weekly train trips, Tabby meets a man who fathered John. She conceals from him the name of his father.

When John is ten, Tabby marries Dan Needham, a drama teacher at the Gravesend Academy. Dan adopts John. After attending the Congregational church in Gravesend, New Hampshire, in deference to Dan, John becomes an Episcopalian; at the same time, Owen becomes an Episcopalian to escape the Catholics, who had insulted his parents. In Sunday school, John and his friends torment Owen, a tiny boy whose family owns Meany Granite Quarry. Spurned by his own parents, Owen adores Tabby for her kindness to him.

When the boys play Little League baseball, Owen is a poor hitter. When he and John are eleven, Owen comes to bat as Tabby arrives at the field and waves to someone in the bleachers. The ball hits her left temple. John's 30-year-old mother dies instantly without clearing up the mystery of John's father. No one locates the ball. John believes that Owen is God's instrument.

The only clues to the missing father are that Tabby took singing lessons in Boston on the recommendation of the Reverend Lewis Merrill, the town's Congregational minister. Owen assures John that the mystery man cannot hide from God. Dan enrolls John at the academy to complete high school. Owen attends on scholarship.

- 2. The Armadillo** John, who was born in 1942, remembers how Tabby introduces the subject of her future husband in 1948. Dan gives John a stuffed armadillo. In summer at Sawyer's Depot in the White Mountains, John visits his cousins—Simon, Noah, and Hester, their sexually precocious sister. Owen stays frequently with the Wheelwrights, but is not invited to visit the cousins, who are too athletic and undisciplined for so frail a boy. When the cousins visit John, Hester tickles Owen and makes him wet his pants.

After Tabby dies, Owen apologizes by giving John his baseball card collection. On Dan's prompting, John returns the cards and exonerates Owen by giving him the armadillo. Owen returns it minus its front claws, which he removes to make it resemble the totem of

Watahantowet, the armless Indian. Owen declares that God claims his arms to control Owen's actions.

In 1987 in Toronto, where John teaches English, he thinks over 20 years of living in Canada. In 1965, Owen had warned that intervention in Vietnam would leave the nation no out. John recalls the gradual escalation of the war and the number of draft dodgers who fled to Canada. He acknowledges that Owen knew a trick that would keep John safe from the draft.

- 3. The Angel** Tabby copies dresses from Boston and fits them on her dressmaker's dummy. The mannequin stands in her bedroom like an attendant angel. Tabby's one red dress seems unusual for so demure a woman. She wears it in Dan's staged production of *Angel Street*.

One night Owen awakens in John's room with a fever and enters Tabby's room. He screams at the sight of the dummy, which looks like the angel of death. Tabby snuggles with him to comfort him. After a four-year courtship, she marries Dan and stops taking singing lessons. Owen makes a doorstep out of granite for a wedding present, which he carves with the date—July 1952. After Tabby's death, Owen retrieves the dummy.

A school friend, Harry Hoyt, later goes to Vietnam and dies from the bite of a poisonous snake. His mother becomes a virulent protester of the war. In February 1987, John wonders why he wasn't nominated for a church office.

- 4. The Little Lord Jesus** At Christmas in 1953, as Dan casts *A Christmas Carol* and Barb Wiggin rehearses the children for the annual pageant, Owen rebels against his typecasting as Announcing Angel. He coerces Barb into reshaping the pageant with himself playing the infant Jesus and convinces Dan to let him play the ghost of Christmas future in the school play. Over the holidays, while staying with Dan in the deserted dormitory, Owen and John use the passkey to investigate student secrets and observe an adult couple making love.

- 5. The Ghost of the Future** Owen receives praise from the local newspaper for his acting, but rejects inviting his parents to attend the pageant. The last performance goes awry because he sees the Meanys in the audience. Owen yells at them from the manger that they don't belong. Joseph, played by John, lifts Owen and carries him down the aisle to the family truck. John explains to Reverend Merrill that Owen is always in charge.

On Christmas Eve, as John awaits Owen's entrance in *A Christmas Carol*, he thinks over the people in the bleachers the day Tabby died and tries to identify someone who might be his father. When Owen appears onstage, he coughs, bends over the gravestone, and faints. Jumping to his feet, he screams. Owen tells Reverend Merrill that he saw his own name on the stone.

A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

When Dan drives Owen home, John realizes that the Meanys have not waited up for their son on Christmas Eve. When Dan and John reach Grandmother Wheelwright's house, they find the maid dead. Late that night, John telephones Owen, who reports that the vision revealed his entire name, Paul O. Meany, Jr. He conceals from John the date on the stone.

In February 1987, Canon Mackie counsels John on his spirited anti-Americanism and for following American politics so meticulously.

- 6. The Voice** When Grandmother Wheelwright buys a television in 1954, she and Owen criticize programming, but enjoy Liberace and late movies. Grandmother takes Owen to Boston to buy school clothes. The admissions office of the high school encourages John to repeat the ninth grade. Owen, to be near his friend, also repeats it. The gesture causes John to love Owen.

That Thanksgiving, Owen takes a dislike to a stone statue of Mary Magdalene on the playground of St. Michael's parochial school. He fears nuns as unnatural. In spring 1957, he warns John not to anticipate too much when he finally learns his father's identity.

In summer 1958, when Owen and John get their driver's licenses, they sit in the harbor and watch sea birds. Owen develops muscles while working at the quarry. That fall, they enter the academy. Owen becomes *The Voice* of the newspaper, *The Grave*, and wields considerable influence over chaperoned dances and the expulsion policy. He earns respect of upperclassmen by dating Hester, a college student.

That summer, John works as a guide for the admissions office. He and Owen cruise Hampton Beach for girls. In fall 1959, Owen charges the academy's search committee to find a new headmaster who is a true educator. John and Owen practice a slam-dunk for which John lifts Owen to the basket. Owen helps John improve his writing, which suffers because of his learning disability.

At the winter term in 1959, Reverend Merrill becomes the academy's interim religion teacher and chaplain. Owen develops a strong belief in miracles and writes an editorial that gets Merrill hired permanently. Owen forces John to plan a college career and a profession. John chooses to major in English; Owen, in geology. He teaches John to read analytically.

In spring 1960, the school hires Randolph White, a conniving bigot ill-suited to head the academy. He begins making changes at the school, including establishing a committee of outsiders to control dismissals. Owen shortens the time of the slam-dunk from eight to four seconds. He begins selling blank draft cards. At Christmas, Harriet gives Owen a diary.

Owen supports John Kennedy's candidacy; the headmaster proclaims the Republican party. When Robert Frost reads a poem at the Kennedy inaugural, Owen complains that the old man is struggling alone against cold wind. Kennedy's idealism infects Owen, causing him to give up sarcasm.

In 1987, John reflects on assigning *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* to his seniors.

- 7. The Dream** At age 19, Owen and John practice the slam-dunk. Owen tries to resurrect John's faith. Rather than go to Harvard or Yale, Owen chooses to apply to

the University of New Hampshire so he can remain close to John. The boys differ in behavior—John is a virgin who drinks; Owen is sexually active, but a non-drinker.

On a jaunt into Boston in November 1961, the two boys recognize Jerrold's, the store where Tabby bought her red dress. John realizes that his mother lied about the dress, which she claimed she couldn't return because the store burned. From the owner, Giovanni Giordano, he learns that Tabby was "The Lady in Red," who sang at the Orange Grove supper club.

John accompanies Owen to the studio of Graham McSwiney, Tabby's former singing instructor, who identifies Owen's strange gravelly voice as the result of a fixed larynx. McSwiney explains about getting Tabby the supper club job, but can't identify John's father. Owen proposes writing a play entitled "Lady in Red" or "The Orange Grove" to lure the man into the audience.

On New Year's Eve 1961, Owen typifies Hester as a forerunner of an angry generation. In January 1962, Larry Lish upsets Owen's idealism by revealing that President John Kennedy has had an illicit relationship with Marilyn Monroe. Because Mrs. Mitzy Lish taunts Owen, he jokingly propositions her. She accuses him of anti-Semitism. The headmaster puts him on probation.

Owen stops writing his column. He begins going to Dr. Dolder, the school psychiatrist, and has parallel appointments with Reverend Merrill. Owen cons the basketball team into carrying Dr. Dolder's Volkswagen to the Great Hall. White, who wants it moved before the students arrive, organizes faculty to lift it downstairs. On the way, they drop the car and destroy it, trapping White inside.

Shortly before Owen's probation ends, Larry Lish implicates him in the fake ID scheme. White expels Owen from school within months of graduation. When Reverend Merrill meets with Owen, he finds him seated at the pastor's desk. Owen asks him to pray for him.

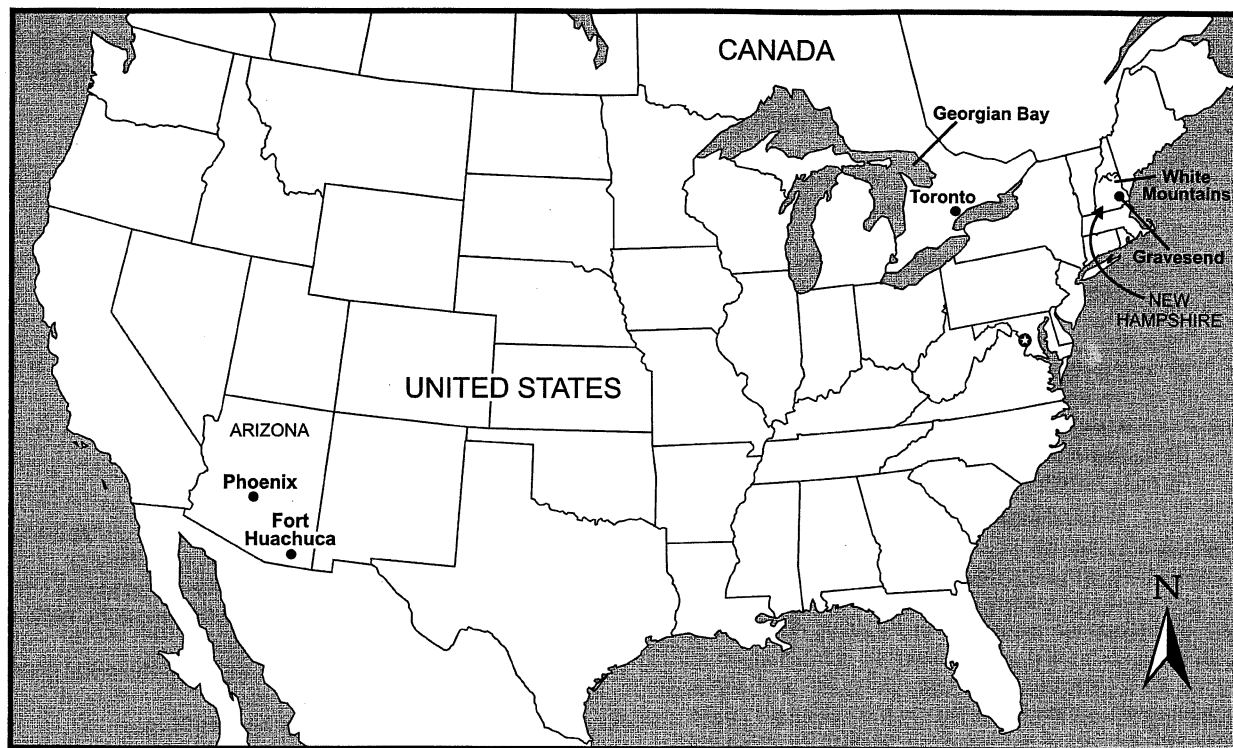
At chapel, the student body assembles before the beheaded statue of Mary Magdalene, which Owen has mutilated, transported from the playground, and bolted to the floor. White protests Merrill's open-ended prayer for Owen; Merrill refuses to end the prayer. Their stand-off brings an end to White's tenure as headmaster. Father Findlay does not press charges for the vandalism. Owen gets a scholarship through ROTC to attend the state university. He dreams of his heroic death.

- 8. The Finger** In summer 1962, Owen lives with Hester and accepts the end of his political idealism. That fall, he and John enter college. Owen lets his grades slide, but excels in military courses. In summer 1963, John works in the monument shop. After John Kennedy's assassination in November 1963, Owen sees more of Reverend Merrill and discusses his dream. In penance, Owen replaces the statue of Mary Magdalene.

John identifies Owen's malaise as "the first person I ever saw 'drop out.'" Hester involves herself more in war protest and bloodies Owen's nose and splits his lip for wanting to go to war and take part in the fighting. Mrs. Hoyt urges John to develop a strategy to keep him out of the war. Owen explains that in his dream, he saves Vietnamese children from an explosion.

After Owen and John graduate, Owen goes to Fort Benjamin Harrison in Indiana; John moves in with Hester

A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY



and enters graduate school. Owen is assigned as escort for the remains of dead soldiers. After John receives a draft notice, in May 1967, Owen slices off John's trigger finger with the diamond wheel to end his eligibility for military service.

John reflects on his emigration to Canada in 1968. He was a worthy candidate for Canadian citizenship because he had a B. A. with honors and an M. A. in English with a thesis on Thomas Hardy. Canon Campbell initiates John into Anglicanism.

9. The Shot In summer 1967, Owen guides John's thesis on Hardy. Hester declares she loves Owen, but won't attend Owen's funeral. Harriet dies in a retirement home.

Anticipating death, Owen invites John to spend some time with him in Arizona. On July 8, 1968, as the two friends await flights at the Phoenix Sky Harbor airport, Owen assists nuns from Catholic Relief Services by taking some Vietnamese boys to the men's room. Dick Jarvits, a deranged teen, hurls a Chicom grenade, which Owen catches. John boosts him to the window slam-dunk fashion; Owen clings to the weapon, which blows off his arms below the elbow. A nun tries to stop the bleeding. Owen asks for a service medal and dies wrapped in her garment.

John asks Reverend Merrill to pray for Owen. Owen's voice orders Merrill to open a desk drawer containing the missing baseball. John identifies Merrill as his father and realizes that Owen tried to prepare him for a wimpy parent. John asks Dan why Tabby chose to leave the Congregational church. Dan explains that the unnamed father wanted to be sure the relationship was stable for John's sake.

That night, John throws the ball through the church window and terrorizes Merrill with the dummy. Merrill

falls to the ground and begs Tabby's forgiveness. At the harbor, John jettisons the baseball, Mary Magdalene's arms, and the dummy into the sea. At the funeral, Merrill displays renewed faith.

John visits with the Meany family and unpacks a Bible and book by Thomas Aquinas from Owen's duffel bag. He reads the diary, which concludes with Owen's welcome of his last day of life. Mr. Meany declares that Owen was a virgin birth. He reveals the headstone with the correct date of death that Owen carved for himself during his last furlough.

After Hester becomes a rock star, John's students are impressed that he is a cousin to someone famous. In September 1987, John battles Eleanor Pribst, a combative member of the English department. Twenty years after Owen's death, Dan urges John to forgive the country for taking Owen away from him and to come back to New Hampshire to teach at the academy.

TIME LINE

- 1923** Tabitha Wheelwright is born in Gravesend, New Hampshire.
- 1940s** Tabby begins taking singing lessons in Boston and sings at the Orange Grove.
- 1942** **summer** Owen Meany and John Wheelwright are born one month apart.
- 1948** Reverend Merrill insists that Tabby wait four years to marry Dan Needham.
summer Owen begins staying overnight with the Wheelwrights.
- 1952** **July** Tabby Wheelwright marries Dan Needham.
- 1953** **July** Tabby Wheelwright dies.
Dec. 24 Owen has a vision of his death.
- 1958** **fall** Owen and John enter Gravesend Academy.
- 1962** **spring** Owen is expelled.

A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

- 1963** **November** President John F. Kennedy is assassinated.
- 1965** United States begins sending ground troops to Vietnam.
- 1966** John and Owen graduate from college. Owen enters the army.
- 1967** After John receives his draft notice, Owen slices off his trigger finger to render him ineligible for military service.
- 1968** Owen is killed. John moves to Canada.
- 1970-71** United States begins withdrawing troops from Vietnam.
- 1973** **February** Cease fire in Vietnam.
- 1975** **spring** North Vietnamese invade and conquer South Vietnam.
- 1981-89** Ronald Reagan is president.
- 1987** **September** Dan urges John to come back to New Hampshire.

AUTHOR SKETCH

John Winslow Irving, who considers himself a comic novelist in the classical sense, holds a unique place in American fiction for inventive, intricately plotted stories, including a bestseller, *The World According to Garp* (1978). The son of Frances Winslow Irving and adopted son of teacher Colin F. N. Irving, he was born John Wallace Blunt, Jr., in Exeter, New Hampshire on March 2, 1942. He says little about his birth name and biological father, a World War II pilot shot down over Japanese-occupied Burma.

While a student at Phillips Exeter Academy, Irving valued the company of his stepfather, a Russian history teacher and school treasurer. Irving battled dyslexia and developed a lifelong love of Canada and of wrestling, a sport that parallels the struggles of his fictional characters and his own efforts to rise from underdog to achiever.

Like his fictional spokesman, John Wheelwright, Irving learned to compensate for his inability to spell and developed composition by numerous rewritings. He further alienated himself from the mainstream by deciding to become a writer. After a brief matriculation at the University of Pittsburgh and a study grant to Vienna, he graduated cum laude from the University of New Hampshire and eventually split his residency between Canada and the Green Mountains of Vermont. He completed an M.F.A. from the University of Iowa, where he studied under Kurt Vonnegut at the campus Writers' Workshop. He taught English at Windham College, the University of Iowa, Mount Holyoke College, and Brandeis and for three years has been an instructor and reader at the Bread Loaf Writers Conference in Middlebury, Vermont.

THE CRITICS AND THE MEDIA

Composing in longhand and rewriting on an electric typewriter, Irving has published eleven heavily peopled novels, a memoir, and short fiction published in *Esquire*, *New York Times Book Review*, and *Playboy*. With some reservations, critics have embraced the blend of fable, slapstick, satire, grotesquerie, polemics, and poignant textured drama in *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. The predominant analysis of the title character is of a rare, unloved young eccentric afflicted with a vision of death. As Owen predicts, he is marked for redemption through martyrdom.

Irving's numerous awards include a Rockefeller grant, Guggenheim and the National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, a National Book Award, and an American Book Award.

Irving aided in the filming of two of his novels, *The World According to Garp* and *The Cider House Rules*. *The Cider House Rules* won six Oscar nominations and an Academy Award for best adapted screenplay.

IRVING'S PUBLISHED WORKS

- The Cider House Rules* (1985)
The Hotel New Hampshire (1981)
The Imaginary Girlfriend: A Memoir (1996)
The 158-Pound Marriage (1974)
A Prayer for Owen Meany (1989)
Setting Free the Bears (1969)
Son of the Circus (1994)
Three by Irving (1980)
Trying to Save Piggy Sneed (1996)
The Water Method Man (1972)
A Widow for One Year (1998)
The World According to Garp (1978)

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES

1. To enumerate the conventions of war literature
2. To comment on the psychological aspects of foreboding, loss, fear, and violence
3. To evaluate behaviors and attitudes of students at a boys' academy
4. To explain the set-up and management of military funerals
5. To summarize types of narrative blended into a single novel
6. To contrast styles of humor, pranks, and other tension relievers
7. To analyze the title image
8. To account for cynicism toward moral decline
9. To characterize faith in miracles
10. To account for a motif of amputation or truncation

SPECIFIC OBJECTS

1. To validate Owen's fear of his death date and prophetic dream
2. To explain why John wants to avoid the draft
3. To list examples of bigotry at Gravesend Academy
4. To discuss the strengths of friendship between Owen, John, and Hester
5. To depict the change in John from poor student to literature teacher
6. To account for Owen's lasting influence on friends and fellow students
7. To analyze John's roles as son, grandson, citizen, worker, friend, student, writer, mourner, and teacher
8. To project how John will choose between staying in

Canada or returning to New Hampshire

9. To recount the terrors of being shut in a dark closet, losing a finger, nearly drowning, dangling over a stage, sitting up with a corpse, and knowing the future
10. To express the difference between Episcopalianism and Catholicism

LITERARY TERMS AND APPLICATIONS

For a better understanding of John Irving's fiction, present the following terms and applications:

anti-hero a protagonist or central figure who lacks the usual heroic qualities of an admirable person or leader, particularly skill, grace, honesty, courage, and truth. Because of his diminutive size and gravelly voice, Owen Meany lacks the physical presence of a hero. His crude retaliation against Randolph White illustrates an ability to adapt his skills to wreak vengeance. His longing for a valorous death in Vietnam fails him, leaving him pathetic and helpless, yet spiritually buoyant as he bleeds to death in the arms of a "penguin."

circular narrative a composite picture of an action drawn from individual testimony of several characters. Irving introduces the fate of Owen Meany in the first lines and moves effortlessly among events, returning to Tabby's death by baseball, John's ambivalence toward identifying his father, and Owen's insistence that he is God's instrument. Although the demise of Owen is never in doubt, Irving holds until the end the details of how Owen asserts training and courage to rescue Vietnamese children from a crazed teenager.

irony an implied discrepancy between what is said or done and what is meant. Adding to the anti-hero's ignoble death is the location of his heroism—the men's room in the Phoenix Sky Harbor airport, with his arms thrust out a window to protect children from a live grenade. Adding to the multiple ironies are his request for a medal, which is pinned to the flag over his casket, and the flag itself, in which his unemotional mother catches fire as she sits huddled by the hearth with the folds around her shoulders.

SETTING

The New England and Canadian milieus of author John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany* form a microcosm of Canadian and American attitudes and behaviors. In the novel's beginning, John searches for clues to his real father while Owen, child of a stony-hearted granite worker, clings to John's mother as a surrogate parent. The boys swim in the water-filled quarry, ride bikes, attend church, and grow up in a small town in the 1950s.

As the era shifts to the 1960s, ominous clouds shadow the characters and nation. As the two boys shed their innocence and travel to Boston, the search for the anomaly in Owen's voice leads them to Graham McSwiney and Jerrold's, the couturier shop where John begins to piece together his mother's double life. Returned to the campus of a New England prep school, Owen and John champion important causes through the campus newspaper and through pranks.

The heavy tread of the Vietnam War fills John's commentary. Irving keeps Asia in the distance while concentrating on John's Toronto milieu and his disillusion with the angry generation. Glimpses of the nation's anguish surface on Harriet's television screen, her periscope view of social disintegration. Ironically, her love-hate relationship with TV continues up to her last moments in the retirement home, where she dies clutching the remote control.

A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

The book moves to significant territory, Fort Huachuca, Arizona, an historic landmark, where Owen continues the family death business by escorting soldiers' remains home to their families. In and out of airports on short hops to California, he develops an insouciance toward death as he anticipates the arrival of his fated final day, which he assumes will dawn in Vietnam. Confused as to the meaning of his dream, he chooses to have John at his side for the last days.

As the two friends enjoy a respite at a motel, they enjoy reminiscing over the textured landscape of Gravesend Academy and Owen's near adoption by the Wheelwright family. The bizarre coalescing of details from the dream seems to surprise Owen, even though he has written his credo in the last lines of his diary. On July 8, as he shepherds the small boys into the Phoenix Sky Harbor airport men's room, the terrain becomes frighteningly familiar. The hurled grenade, tall palm trees, his slam-dunk, and first aid from a kindly "penguin" complete the picture that has haunted his thoughts and aspirations.

The heavy toll on John freights his heart with regret and yearning for Owen. In a classroom of girls that is the antithesis of Gravesend Academy, John performs the school-teacher's task for which he has so carefully prepared at the University of New Hampshire. His world, reduced to school and the Anglican church, balloons outward long enough for him to share a brief rest at Katherine Keeling's vacation home at Georgian Bay, Canada. It is the kindly voice of Dan Needham, John's adoptive father, who urges him to give up the rancorous retreat in Toronto and come back to Gravesend to "forgive and forget."

CROSS-CURRICULAR SOURCES

Novels

Tom Clancy, *Without Remorse*
Charles Frasier, *Cold Mountain*
Graham Greene, *The Quiet American*
Walter Dean Myers, *Fallen Angels*
Bao Ninh, *Sorrow of War: A Novel of North Vietnam*
Tim O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried*
Dalton Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun*

Poetry

"Visit to the Wall," <www.vietvet.org/vmannew.htm>

Nonfiction

James Carroll, *American Requiem: God, My Father, and the War that Came Between Us*
Bernard Edelman, *Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam*
Stephanie Feinstein, *The 1960s: From the Vietnam War to Flower Power*
Deborah Kent, *The Vietnam War: "What Are We Fighting For?"*
Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*
Michael Lind, *Vietnam, the Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disasterous Military Conflict*
Al Santoli, ed., *Everything We Had: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Thirty-three American Soldiers Who Fought It*
Harry G. Summers, *Vietnam War Almanac*
Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*
Stewart O'Nan, *The Vietnam Reader*
Jon Swain, *River of Time: A Memoir of Vietnam and Cambodia*

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Born on the Fourth of July (1988)
Full Metal Jacket (1987)
Go Tell the Spartans (1977)
Platoon (1986)
Vietnam: A Television History (WGBH, 1983)

THEMES AND MOTIFS

A study of the central issues and situations in *A Prayer for Owen Meany* should include these aspects:

Themes

- dilemma
- family
- friendship
- fate
- alienation
- leadership
- war
- anarchy
- isolation
- self-sacrifice
- redemption

Motifs

- coping with false government officials
- understanding the sources of disillusion
- assuming the role of savior
- completing unfinished business
- recapturing lost faith
- embracing miracles and divine grace

MEANING STUDY

Below are significant words, phrases, or sentences from the novel. Explain each in context. Chapter and page numbers pinpoint each entry so that you can re-read the passage in which it appears.

1. IN THE RELAXING SETTING OF CAPTAIN BLOOD!
Owen observed. (Chap. 6, p. 269)
(Owen and Harriet Wheelwright become enamored by the late show. They enjoy the romantic adventure Captain Blood, the 1935 film that made Errol Flynn a major movie star. Written in 1922 by Rafael Sabatini, it followed his first success, Scaramouche ([1921].)
2. Owen hated Palm Sunday: the treachery of Judas, the cowardice of Peter, the weakness of Pilate. (Chap. 6, p. 278)
(Owen, a Christian idealist, dislikes the last Sunday before Easter, which commemorates Jesus's ride into Jerusalem among waving palm fronds and a downward spiral preceding his crucifixion. Betrayed by Judas, his

A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

disciple, and denied by Peter, Jesus came before Pontius Pilate, who refused to pass judgment on a matter that lay under the jurisdiction of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish court.)

3. And regarding the merits of teaching "respect for personal property," that was an old-fashioned idea; and the word "billfolds," in Dan's opinion, was outdated—although Dan agreed with old Archibald Thorndike that Randy White's tactics were pure "Gestapo." (Chap. 7, p. 399)

(The drama of the fake ID cards produces in miniature the same ruthless measures taken in Vietnam. With disregard for constitutional rights, the new headmaster confiscates wallets from students to search for illegal identification. His actions remind Dan of the Gestapo, an acronym for Geheime Staatspolizei, a German law-enforcement agency initiated in 1934 by Nazis.)

4. Until the summer of '62, I thought that childhood and adolescence were a purgatory without apparent end; I thought that youth, in a word, "sucked." (Chap. 8, p. 417) *(Owen corrects John's misconception of purgatory, a Catholic construct that describes a period of penitence after death before the shriven soul can enter heaven.)*

5. SHE SAID SHE'D BELIEVE IN THE GENEVA ACCORDS WHEN THERE WAS NOTHING BUT PARROTS AND MONKEYS MOVING ALONG THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL! (Chap. 8, p. 427)

(Harriet Wheelwright puts little faith in the Geneva Accords, a series of ten documents issued by nine factions—China, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Laos, France, Britain, Poland, Russia, and the United States—between April 26 and July 21, 1954, concluding with the Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference. The representatives of Southeast Asia called for a cease-fire on the 17th parallel, which divided Vietnam, and for free elections concerning reunification. The accords were never implemented, and the country was divided into Communist North Vietnam and pro-Western South Vietnam.)

6. THAT'S WHAT I THOUGHT KENNEDY WAS: A MORALIST. BUT HE WAS JUST GIVING US A SNOW JOB. HE WAS JUST BEING A GOOD SEDUCER. I THOUGHT HE WAS A SAVIOR. (Chap. 8, p. 430)

(Owen falls prey to a false savior in John Kennedy, the president in whom many young people placed their trust. When he proved to be a master politician with clay feet, idealistic youths like Owen became embittered and dropped out of full participation in citizenship.)

7. And as for fear, you would have thought the Cuban missile Crisis—that October—would have sufficed; you would have thought that would have scared the shit out of us, as people in New Hampshire are always untruthfully claiming. (Chap. 8, p. 434)

(The Missile Crisis of October 1962 erupted after the United States learned that the Soviet Union had installed nuclear-tipped missiles in Cuba. After the United States blockaded Cuba, the Soviets capitulated on October 28 and agreed to remove the missiles. Analysts consider this tense period the closest the world has come to global nuclear war.)

8. I'D LIKE TO GET HIM UNDER THE DIAMOND WHEEL—ALL I'D NEED IS JUST A FEW SECONDS.

(Chap. 8, pp. 438-439)

(Owen, who has worked his way up in the granite business from quarrier to skilled stone cutter, thinks of the diamond wheel as the perfect weapon to subdue his nemesis, headmaster Randolph White. A cutting edge of pure carbon found in alluvial and glacial deposits, diamond is the hardest naturally occurring substance. Because it has no cleavage, the diamond can be set in the crown of a hollow metal drill for cutting rock and glass.)

9. IT TURNS OUT IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO RESTORE MARY MAGDALENE EXACTLY AS SHE WAS—I MEAN THE STATUE," he said. (Chap. 8, p. 444)

(An ironic statement that ties a fallen woman to Owen's loss of innocence, this comment refers to the statue that Owen mutilates to avenge himself on Randolph White. She was one of Jesus' most enigmatic followers. The first to see him following his resurrection, she is a figure of supposition, cult, and legend, which fills in the brief account of her in the New Testament with apocryphal tales of a separate ministry and marriage to the disciple John.)

10. We turned to my grandmother's *Wharton Encyclopedia of Venomous Snakes*—which had already provided Owen and me with several nightmares, when we were children—and there we found our vision of the enemy in Southeast Asia: Russell's viper. (Chap. 8, p. 466)

*(A member of a snake subspecies equipped with retractable hollow fangs, Russell's viper, also known as *daboia* or *tic polonga*, is indigenous to India, Southeast Asia, and Java. This virulent attacker, reaching up to five feet in length, is a common cause of snakebite in open country and an appropriate symbol of the conduct of the Vietnam War.)*

COMPREHENSION STUDY

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers with quotations from the novel.

Motivation

1. Why does Owen want to go to Vietnam?

(Owen does not support the escalation of a ground war in Vietnam and deplores the dispatching of more American troops to kill more innocent civilians and fight without hope of winning. His urge to go to war stems from a prophetic vision and recurring dreams of heroism in uniform. At the last performance of A Christmas Carol, he leans down toward Scrooge's tomb and sees his formal name—Paul O. Meany, Jr.—and the date of his death. After leaving Gravesend Academy, Hester reports his suffering from recurrent dreams of death. Counseling with Reverend Merrill continues as Owen comes to grips with destiny.)

In the dream, Owen sees himself aiding stricken Vietnamese children. The dreamscape allies nuns and John with palm trees, an explosion, and a shower of particles. Owen surmises that his destiny lies in Vietnam, where he will die performing a heroic salvation of innocents. After he joins ROTC, graduates from the University of New Hampshire as a second lieutenant, and accepts assignment at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, escorting soldiers' remains to their families, he still nurtures

A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

hope of reassignment to combat so he can fulfill the promise of greatness. He misunderstands that fate needs no assistance. Without his planning, the elements come together in a men's room in the Phoenix Sky Harbor airport.)

Setting

2. How do John and Owen acclimate to Gravesend Academy?

(The end of Owen's haphazard growing-up years occurs at a welcoming environment—the academic surroundings of a boys' prep school. Still in Gravesend and close to his family, the Wheelwrights, and the granite works, he thrives in classes and extra-curricular activities and attempts to play basketball. To earn his way, he serves breakfast in the cafeteria. As The Voice and eventual editor of The Grave, Owen excels at analyzing campus life and flaws in educational opportunities and earns respect from others for level-headed advice.)

Another plus for the prep school years is the deepening of friendship between Owen and John. As John struggles to master reading assignments, foreign language, writing, and spelling, Owen finds ways to assist. He suggests methods that improve John's understanding and retention of Thomas Hardy's novel *Jude the Obscure*. After Owen earns the hatred of the Lishes and Randolph White, John rejoices to see the student body and faculty back Owen for his good qualities and potential.)

Character Development

3. How does war change John?

(Owen and Hester drum into John the idiocy of continued fighting in Vietnam and the outrage of government authorities who lie to the public about the severity of the situation. John hesitates to establish a plan of action in the event that he receives a draft notice. Despite the prompting of Owen and the rabid Mrs. Hoyt, John is unprepared to flee to Canada. When Owen comes home for a visit and slices into John's trigger finger with the diamond wheel, John realizes how seriously his friend takes a threat of war.)

After Owen's death, John's emigration to Toronto embitters him against American politics and the country's stature among nations. Avidly, he reads the *New York Times* and rails against deceitful post-war politics. It is Dan who informs John that he is still fighting the Vietnam War—still punishing a nation that produced Dick Jarvits, the deranged teenager who hurls the grenade that kills Owen.)

Historical Milieu

4. How does the war and its aftermath affect Americans?

(John Irving focuses on the Vietnam Era from the point of view of the war at home that divides government from citizenry, taxpayer from soldier, and old from young. Owen predicts that repeated deceptions, breaches of trust, and inadvisable military actions will produce an angry generation. True to his prognostication, Hester becomes a virulent anti-war demonstrator. Her beliefs, friendships, and rock music as well as bouts of vomiting illustrate a spirit at odds with continued military engagement in Southeast Asia.)

After John moves to Toronto to teach at Bishop Strachen girls' school, he turns a critical eye south

toward his abandoned homeland and excoriates politicians for the harm they did to his generation. Grimly unforgiving, he grieves silently for Owen, denying himself relationships with women by remaining true to an adolescent friendship. Slowly returned to religious faith and membership in the Anglican faith, he goes through the motions of becoming a Canadian, but his heart still wages war on the nation that cost his generation its youthful idealism.)

Theme

5. What does the amputation reveal about love?

(Irving writes the amputation scene as though it were a formal deflowering. John, still the naif, puts his trust in Owen, the wise friend who wants to keep John safe from the draft. John approaches the sacrificial altar without fully comprehending Owen's plan. John admits, "I've always been pretty slow . . . It wasn't until I caught the whiff of a hospital in the monument shop that I realized what he meant by JUST A LITTLE COURAGE.")

Frozen in terror, John listens to Owen explain how he should position his finger out of the way of the knuckle of the middle finger. As always, Owen encourages him to have faith and assures him that they will be at the hospital in minutes for medical care. He justifies the amputation out of fear that John is also in the dream, thus, threatened by Vietnam. Like a lover guiding a virgin through a first sexual experience, Owen says, "I LOVE YOU . . . NOTHING BAD IS GOING TO HAPPEN TO YOU—TRUST ME. As blood spatters his protective goggles, Owen declares the amputation "MY LITTLE GIFT TO YOU.")

Interpretation

6. What does the novel say about friendship?

(From opposite ends of the social strata, John and Owen come together in mutual need. John lives in privilege and plenty, but longs to know the identity of his father. Owen, a misshapen child isolated and rejected by his ignorant parents, reaches out to the world for wisdom, learning, and love. He finds all three with the Wheelwright family, especially Tabby, the soft-breasted mother figure who envelops him with affection and acceptance. Ironically, John and Owen cement their friendship after Tabby's accidental death. A permanent house guest, Owen loves Harriet Wheelwright and shares her love-hate attraction to television. He expresses his determination to remain John's close friend by voluntarily repeating the ninth grade. After Dan and Harriet create a place for Owen at Gravesend Academy, he and John share the experience of preparing for college. Like yin and yang, they accommodate the faults and shortcomings of each other.)

As maturity tugs at the boys, they feel manhood pulling them in different directions. John suddenly becomes the scholar while Owen drifts away from classroom excellence to cultivate the military and his obligation to ROTC. Sharing visits, letters, and phone calls throughout Owen's basic training, the two remain close enough for John to fear Owen's attempts to secure overseas assignment. Owen reciprocates by fearing John's forced participation in the war.)

Conflict

7. How does Owen's recurrent dream come true?

A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

(John and Owen's friendship reaches a pinnacle on Owen's final days. As the date of his death approaches, he determines to bring John to Phoenix for relaxation and a last post-adolescent sharing of their good memories. Owen experiences a buoyance as he begins to wonder if the elements of his dream could possibly fit so mundane a setting as an Arizona airport. He thinks, "IT WAS JUST A CRAZY DREAM! WHO THE FUCK KNOWS WHAT GOD KNOWS?"

The countdown begins with Owen's gasp as four nuns from Catholic Relief Services shepherd Vietnamese children off a plane from the West Coast. Owen involves himself in the job of comforting the children and taking the boys to the restroom. At the fatal moment, Owen asks John to stand beside him as Dick Jarvits menaces him with a grenade. Owen uses his distinctive voice and knowledge of Vietnamese phrases to order the children out of range.

As though preparing for a paratroop jump, Owen asks, "READY?" The handoff of the grenade replicates the many practice sessions in the school gym as John lifts Owen to the window. His death comes gently, with the nun, Major Rawls, and John attempting to halt the bleeding with tourniquets. Owen repeats Jesus's promise of everlasting life, asks for a medal, and complains of cold. He looks only at John and dies with a cheerful expression.)

Atmosphere

8. What does the granite works reveal about the Meany family?

(John Irving satirizes the stony-hearted New Hampshire parents who reject their undersized son with the ruined gravelly voice. Like the stoic natives New England is famous for, the two fall into the delusion that Owen is a virgin birth. The assertion earns them the scorn of the Catholic church. Their ignorance and lack of love for the boy forces him to flee to the Episcopal church, become John's friend, and forge a makeshift family among the Wheelwrights. Owen maintains respect and concern for his biological family by attending prep school and college close to home, working at the quarry and monument shop each summer, and looking out for his parents' interests. He learns something about death and grieving from the job of making monuments for graves and, in some fashion, continues his father's work in the army.

The family's end is pitiable. Irving retreats from turning them into monsters by stressing the comic aspect of their truncated lives. In the front right-center pew of the campus church, "They sat like upheaved slabs of granite, not moving, their eyes fixed upon the dazzling medal that winked in the beam of sunlight on top of Owen's casket." Still unbending and unemotional, they view Owen's body with "the same strangled awe" that they had displayed when he played the infant Jesus in childhood at the church Christmas pageant. To John, the unspoken thought rings true that their attendance at the funeral was a sacrilege.

Mrs. Meany is so rigid that, at the end of the service, she is unable to receive the folded flag. Mr. Meany takes it for her as they "sat like stones." Mrs. Meany's death that spring accentuates the demise of the Meany Granite Company. After living a cold, unfeeling life, she catches

fire when an ember ignites the flag around her shoulders. Mr. Meany, lacking a job, becomes a meter reader for the electric company and goes about his rounds with Owen's medal pinned to him.)

Author Purpose

9. How does Irving incorporate details from his own life? *(John Irving draws on his own background and home life for elements of the story. Like John Wheelwright, he has a major in English, taught literature and writing, and lived in New England and Canada. He attended Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, the hometown that he renames Gravesend. His lack of a biological father and a subsequent loving relationship with a stepfather parallel John Wheelwright's tenuous growing-up years. However, unlike Tabby, Irving's mother gave him clippings about his real father while Irving was undergoing a divorce as a way of explaining her own feelings about the husband who abandoned her.*

*John Irving recaptures the tenor of the 1960s, when many of his own generation rebelled against the war. The ambivalence of John Wheelwright toward faith and patriotism suggests feelings that Irving may have shared. Like Irving, John structures analysis of events by comparing them to literature, analyzing personal alienation to events in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* and reckoning fate in terms of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* and William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.)*

Analysis

10. How does Irving turn Owen into a Christ figure? *(The creation of a darkly comic Christ figure commands Irving's attention to detail. Plotted as the story of a misfit, the novel pictures Owen, like Christ, being conceived under questionable circumstances and causing uproar among religious authorities, who doubt Mrs. Meany's story that she was a virgin at the time. Like Christ, Owen works in his father's shop and dutifully follows his trade until he feels called to a higher destiny. He participates in a mock birth scene in the role of baby Jesus. At school and in casual settings, he amazes his elders with wisdom and clings to faith in moments of trial, just as Christ caused a stir in the temple at age twelve and, in his last days, underwent temptation in the desert.*

The prophecy of Owen's death in military service on a particular date compares to Christ's knowledge that his sacrifice was a requirement of his life on earth as God's instrument. Owen's kindness to the Vietnamese children compares with Christ's command to "suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not." Owen's redemption through martyrdom elevates him to a mythic figure whom local people honor. At the funeral, Mary Beth Baird, like Mary at the cross, comments symbolically, "Do you remember how we used to lift him up?"

HOW LANGUAGE WORKS

John Irving creates episodes that are both comic and revealing. The following lines illustrate his ability to use dark humor for multiple purpose.

1. After Owen experiences terror over seeing the dressmaker's dummy near Tabby's bed, the boys creep back to her room, "crawling on our bellies like snipers in search of cover, until the whole picture of her bed—her body in an inverted question mark, and the dummy

A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

standing beside her—was visible.” The humor of their mission in the dark and Tabby’s ambiguous posture reflect on Owen’s role as both killer of Tabby and seeker of an avenging angel who threatens innocence.

2. Owen’s hatred for Barb Wiggin takes on dramatic overtones. He begs “Dan to cast her as a prostitute or a child-molester,” a suitable role for a grown woman who kisses a male child on the lips and smirks knowingly at his erection.
3. At the wedding of Dan and Tabby, dueling ministers face off at Hurd’s chapel. Ironically, when Reverend Merrill takes over from Reverend Wiggin, it is Merrill’s task to intone “Love one another as I have loved you” over the woman he impregnated, then abandoned to raise a fatherless child.
4. In reference to Tabby’s burial, John comments on the choice of a closed casket to conceal the unsightly lump on his mother’s temple: “Not that we Wheelwrights were much for open coffins, under any circumstances; Yankees believe in closed doors.” The closure reflects on his mother’s failure to tell him about his father and on the closing of John’s mind against America after he emigrates to Toronto.
5. After the unfortunate collision of Mr. Fish’s dog Sagamore with the diaper truck, the “driver sat on the running board of the cab. ‘Shit,’ he said.”
6. As children suffer from the heat during the Christmas pageant, “The donkey’s ass and hind legs simply dropped to the floor, as if the beast had suffered a selective stroke—or had been shot; its rump was paralyzed.” The humorous image of the collapsing animal prefigures the retreat of young citizens from support of the Vietnam War.
7. When the crass Randolph White comes to Gravesend Academy with his wife Samantha, gossip characterizes them in Chicago terms: “His was a ‘meat family’ background, too—although there was said to be more money in the meat she came from.”
8. While investigating the empty dormitory, John and Owen lose their innocence from an encounter with adults making love on a student’s bed: “That the Brinker-Smiths were engaged in a far more creative and original use of Waterhouse Hall than Owen and I could make of the old dormitory had a radical effect on the rest of our Christmas vacation.” Pounded in the head by the mattress, Owen observes, “SEX MAKES PEOPLE CRAZY.”
9. In flight from the country that betrayed his friend, John arrives in Ottawa on a rainy day with a jaded notion of his own worth: “My life is a reading list. I’m not complaining; I’ve had enough excitement. Owen Meany was enough excitement for a lifetime.”

ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Art

1. Create a bulletin board contrasting settings in McSwiney’s studio, the Great Hall, harbor, Grandmother Wheelwright’s basement closet, monument shop, Owen’s bedroom, the Meany fireplace, Tabby’s bedroom, Hester’s apartment, and the Phoenix Sky Harbor airport men’s room. Stress unusual objects in each place, such as the flag draped around Mrs. Meany, the dummy wearing the red dress, use of a blowtorch to free

the headmaster from the Volkswagen, John unpacking Owen’s duffel bag, Owen wrapped in a nun’s wimple, and the armadillo with its front claws removed.

2. Using desktop publishing or other media, design contrasting murals or posters to demonstrate these pairs: grenade and nun’s wimple, diamond wheel and granite doorstop, plywood coffins and a baseball, Sagamore’s grave and the manger, The Book of Common Prayer and Captain Blood, and the desk drawer and Liberate.
3. With a group, design a brochure, web site, frieze, or poster series illustrating relationships between unlike characters, including Owen and Watahantowet, Harriet Wheelwright and Lydia, Hester and John’s students, Chief Pike and Randolph White, Dan and Reverend Merrill, and Reverend Katherine Keeling and Eleanor Pribst.
4. Draw a montage or mural detailing American politics from the 1950s to the 1980s.
5. List books, stories, movies, videos, art, sculpture, dance, song, and other creativity that depict the effects of war on ordinary people.

Cinema

Summarize aloud the attitude of several screenwriters of movies about the Vietnam War. Contrast several plots with Owen Meany’s approach to war themes and situations, for example, accepting a draft notice, preparing a body for presentation to a family, taking a state-side job, learning survival methods, studying Vietnamese phrases, and aiding a friend who wants to avoid war.

Drama

1. Improvise a scene in which Owen Meany and Harriet Wheelwright discuss John’s problems with dyslexia and the type of educational experience that will prepare him for graduate school and the teaching profession.
2. Role-play the part of a doctor, nurse, teacher, Chief Pike, chaplain, nun, war correspondent, Major Rawls, nuns from Catholic Relief Services, or grief counselor in the aftermath of Owen’s bizarre death. Explain how the story would change if Owen had died in combat.

Education

1. Write an encyclopedia entry on dyslexia. Explain the methods of study and retention that Owen teaches John. Add your own suggestions on how to help a learning disabled reader get the most out of reading.
2. Compose program notes for *Angel Street* or *A Christmas Carol* as directed by Dan at Gravesend Academy.

Economics

1. Create a non-combat military job for Owen. Put his experience to use as stone cutter, geologist, editor, and tutor to John, for example, in gathering news from the front, or writing speeches.
2. Total in columns the year-by-year loss of life, maiming, and expenditures for the Vietnam War, including transporting the dead, burials, post-war counseling, medical care, prostheses, and rehabilitation.

Geography

1. Draw a Venn diagram or cause-and-effect chart explaining why Owen goes to Fort Huachuca, Arizona, and John settles in Toronto.
2. Compose a tour guide of New England. Include the history of Exeter, New Hampshire, beginning with the arrival of English settlers among Indians. Add a sidebar

A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

on the development of Phillips Exeter Academy.

Health and First Aid

1. Make an oral report on amputation. Contrast John's loss of a trigger finger with Owen's loss of both forearms. Explain why Owen experiences a chill while he bleeds to death.
2. Using charts of the human circulatory system, explain why a tourniquet can lessen the danger of a lost limb.

History and Social Studies

1. Write a theme, create a web site, or sketch a flow chart describing the different levels of command that handle the recovery of casualties, return of bodies to the States, and announcement to family members of each soldier's loss. Determine why Owen likes his job.
2. Divide the class into small groups to discuss these questions:
 - How did Jane Fonda endanger U. S. morale? How was her visit to North Vietnam unlike the public reaction to the escalation of the Vietnam War or the My Lai massacre?
 - How did the Vietnam War differ from other recent wars?
 - What influence did Abbie Hoffman, Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, William Westmoreland, and Martin Luther King, Jr., have on war protest and draft evasion?
3. Outline waves of protest and anarchy that pit government agencies against student dissenters. Contrast your time line to the escalation of the Vietnam War.

Language Arts

1. Read aloud passages that capture a single negative feeling, especially cruelty, callousness, inappropriate humor, hesitation, anger, terror, loss, self-doubt, or grief. Add details that express how these feelings linger and haunt John. Account for his obsession with news from the States and for Dan's advice to forgive and forget the nation for robbing him of Owen.
2. Read or listen to an audio cassette of poems by Thomas Hardy or Robert Frost, essays of Thomas Aquinas, *The Book of Common Prayer*, the song "Four Strong Winds," or the speeches of John Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. Determine why Owen commits these to memory.
3. Using incidents from the book, comment on gradual changes in the speaker. Contrast John in boyhood with John as a teacher, expatriate, cousin of a rock star, grandson, Christian, and mourner at Owen's funeral.
4. Illustrate a gazetteer of terms from the Vietnam War.
5. List contrasting elements that characterize John and Owen.
6. Write a poem, combat slogan, or the lyrics to a song or hymn in which you express the frustration of young men pondering a way out of the draft through self-mutilation, flight to Canada, enrollment in the Peace Corps, or conscientious objector status. Compare your lyrics to those of popular American music from the late 1960s and 1970s.
7. Characterize in a theme the ironic or ominous implications of an Episcopalian named Paul, a lieutenant named Meany, a bigot named White, a town named

Gravesend, a student newspaper called *The Grave*, a columnist called The Voice, a Christmas pageant director named Barb, a sexual bully named Mitzy Lish, an airport named Phoenix Sky Harbor, and a friend named Katherine Keeling.

8. Compare Owen's prophetic dream to Holden Caulfield's dream that he will become a "catcher in the rye" and rescue endangered children.

Journalism

1. Compose a list of questions to accompany a televised interview with families who have received the body of a war casualty. Balance questions and answers to give grim details and moments of reflection and humor, such as memories of the victim in childhood or lines from a letter from the front.
2. Discuss in an editorial the attitude of Canadians toward Americans who fled the United States to avoid the draft.
3. Summarize in a chalk talk the purpose of a faculty adviser to *The Grave*. Point out sentences written by The Voice that exceed propriety and damage school morale. Suggest less volatile topics for Owen's column.

Psychology

1. Discuss in a short speech the effect of the broken window and dressmaker's dummy on Reverend Merrill. Explain why John loses respect for his father.
2. Compose a lecture on dealing with the death of a soldier or the suicide of a veteran. Suggest ways that families can relieve sorrow and loss, for example, by honoring Harry Hoyt or Owen Meany with a special service, plaque, or public monument.
3. Contrast the prayers for Owen Meany. Explain how the Reverend Merrill helps students cope with Owen's expulsion from school and aids the people of Gravesend with Owen's death.

ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT

1. List examples of intrusion, cruelty, vulgarity, vandalism, and victimization in various characters, for example, the torment of Owen during Sunday school.
2. Compile a list of actions that demonstrate alienation and isolation, particularly John's search for his father, Harriet's loss of memory, Owen's refusal to write his column, Dan's drinking, Reverend Merrill's loss of faith, John's emigration, and Owen's arrival to a dark house on Christmas Eve.
3. Compose a scene in which the students of Gravesend Academy raise a monument to Owen and other victims of the Vietnam War.
4. Make a character list and explain the flaws of each.
5. Account for multiple meanings in these symbolic elements: amputation of a finger, a declawed armadillo, a red dress, death by snakebite, *Angel Street*, the granite quarry, Harriet's dark closet, *The Grave*, Phoenix Sky Harbor, and a thesis on Thomas Hardy.

A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

VOCABULARY TEST

Complete each of the following sentences by underlining an appropriate word from the list in each line.

1. The first rehearsal was scheduled after the Annual Parish Meeting and the (consensus, vestry, ell, lexicon, bastion) elections—almost at the beginning of our Christmas vacation.
2. I was surprised that he had never unpackaged all the baseball cards that he had so symbolically delivered to me, and that I'd returned to him; I was surprised at how withered and (effete, frugal, posh, grotesque, dogmatic) were my armadillo's amputated claws—they had once seemed such treasures, and now, in addition to their ugliness, they even appeared smaller than I'd remembered them.
3. That the Wiggins had actually liked *The Robe* made up Owen's mind: whether he ever got to go to Sawyer Depot for Christmas or not, he would never participate in another (predestination, sagamore, nativity, banshee, rectory).
4. Dan Needham lived in Waterhouse Hall, so named for some deceased (Calvinist, seraphim, alewife, cryptographer, curmudgeon) of a classicist, a Latin teacher named Amos Waterhouse, whose rendering of Christmas carols in Latin—I was sure—could not have been worse than the gloomy muddle made of them by Dan and Owen Meany.
5. There was a high-velocity projection of fragments—the fragmentation is usually distributed in a (uniform, diminutive, tentative, certifiable, disoriented) pattern; this is what Major Rawls explained to me, later, but the cement window ledge prevented any fragments from reaching me or the children.
6. Perhaps my cousins were all relieved to hear that Owen was "getting over a cold" because they thought this might partially explain the hypnotic awfulness of Owen's voice; I could have told them that Owen's voice was uninfluenced by his having a cold—and his "getting over a cold" was news to me—but I was so relieved to see my cousins behaving respectfully that I had no desire to (buttress, undermine, douse, manifest, placate) Owen's effect on them.
7. Although the Squamscott was never the Thames, the big oceangoing ships once made their way to Gravesend on the Squamscott; the channel has since become so obstructed by rocks and (torpor, privet, talisman, quince, shoals) that no boat requiring any great draft of water could navigate it.
8. I could think only that Hester's snarling mouth was about as inviting as Firewater's; yet I think we both realized that the potential embarrassment of being mated to this (conjugal, irreparable, waning, slatternly, slathering) position for any duration of time, while Noah and Simon observed our breathing and minor movements, would perhaps lead to even greater suffering than indulging in a single kiss.
9. And so the incident rested with Owen Meany receiving the punishment of disciplinary probation for the duration of the winter term; aside from the jeopardy this put him in—in regard to any other trouble he might get into—disciplinary probation was no great (cowl, hiatus, aperture, imposition, reparation), especially for a day boy.
10. "And I don't mean a desk job in Saigon!" she said to him. "Don't you dare be a participant in that (loquacity, thesis, genuflection, triptych, genocide)!"
11. And the visual accompaniment is a mystifying blend of contemporary, (penultimate, carnal, hapless, tandem, apocryphal) encounters with unidentified young boys intercut with black-and-white, documentary footage from the Vietnam War.
12. I doubt that Owen ever would have become "sophisticated" enough to make that separation—not even today, when it seems that the only people who are (adamant, motley, lugubrious, transient, abstaining) in their claim that public and private morality are inseparable are those creep-evangelists who profess to "know" that God prefers capitalists to communists, and nuclear power to long hair.
13. And to the students of Gravesend who thus (opined, rendezvoused, harangued, chafed, finagled) 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.
14. A typical outing for a Gravesend senior began with a subway ride to Harvard Square; there—with the use of a fake draft card, or with the assistance of an older Gravesend graduate (now attending Harvard)—booze was purchased in abundance and consumed with (eucharist, patronage, abandon, androgyny, kitsch).
15. The Maiden Hill Road was dark; there were still some emergency-road-repair cones and unlit flares off the side of the road by the trestle bridge, the (vigilante, imprimatur, abutment, eccentricity, symmetry) of which had been the death of Buzzy Thurston.

A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Character Identification (30 points)

Match each of the following descriptions from the novel with a character name. Place the letter of your response in the blank provided at left.

- | | | |
|-------|---|------------------------|
| _____ | 1. selects a Joseph and a Mary. | A. Barb |
| _____ | 2. waves to someone in the bleachers. | B. Harriet |
| _____ | 3. takes Owen shopping. | C. Merrill |
| _____ | 4. declaws an armadillo. | D. Mrs. Hoyt |
| _____ | 5. lies dead with coins taped to her eyes. | E. Lydia |
| _____ | 6. breaks an attacker's neck. | F. Canon Mackie |
| _____ | 7. counsels John about his anti-Americanism. | G. Tabby |
| _____ | 8. reveals John Kennedy's affair with Marilyn Monroe. | H. Sagamore |
| _____ | 9. looks for the murder weapon. | I. Larry Lish |
| _____ | 10. advises young men on draft evasion. | J. Buster |
| _____ | 11. plays the piano for the Lady in Red. | K. Pike |
| _____ | 12. lies in a fetal position to ask forgiveness. | L. Owen |
| _____ | 13. comes out of retirement to support Owen. | M. Dan |
| _____ | 14. leaves a gift in an unopened bag. | N. Archibald Thorndike |
| _____ | 15. is killed by a diaper truck. | O. Rawls |

Part II: True/False (20 points)

Mark the following statements either **T** for true or **F** if any part is false.

- _____ 1. McSwiney diagnoses a fixed larynx.
- _____ 2. Owen expects to be reassigned to Vietnam.
- _____ 3. The Volkswagen falls on Randy White before plunging down the stairs and onto the campus.
- _____ 4. Mr. Fish gladly relinquishes to Owen his role as a silent ghost.
- _____ 5. Eleanor Pribst confides to Katherine Keeling that John is a homosexual.
- _____ 6. Dick Jarvits wants to destroy the Vietnamese who killed his half-brother.
- _____ 7. John's students are impressed that he is the cousin of a rock star.
- _____ 8. Dan interprets the gift of baseball cards as an apology for killing Tabby.
- _____ 9. Hester agrees to have children by Owen, but refuses to follow him to Arizona.
- _____ 10. A Canadian border guard asks John if he is a draft dodger.

A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

Part III: Completion (20 points)

Fill in the blanks below with a word or phrase which completes the sentence. Place your answer in the space provided at left.

1. After John receives a _____, in May 1967, Owen slices off John's trigger finger with the _____ to end his eligibility.
2. Owen stops writing his _____ and begins going to Dr. Dolder, the school psychiatrist, and has parallel appointments with _____.
3. When _____ reads a poem at the Kennedy _____, Owen complains that the old man is struggling against cold wind.
4. After attending the Congregational church in Gravesend, New Hampshire, in early childhood, John becomes an Episcopalian; at the same time, _____ becomes an Episcopalian to escape the _____, who had insulted his parents.
5. The only clues to the missing father are that Tabby took singing lessons in _____ on the recommendation of the Reverend _____.

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Describe Owen's attitude toward ROTC.
2. Give reasons for pranks, smoking, and inappropriate humor among students.
3. Discuss the causes of an angry generation.
4. Account for Owen's amputation of John's trigger finger.
5. Summarize events that lead up to Owen's heroic act.

A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: Matching (30 points)

Match the following actions with characters from the list below. Place the letter of your response in the blank provided at left.

- | | | |
|-------|--|-------------------|
| _____ | 1. longs to visit Sawyer's Depot. | A. Barb |
| _____ | 2. meets a man on the train. | B. Harriet |
| _____ | 3. bloodies Owen's nose and splits his lip. | C. Merrill |
| _____ | 4. leaves the angel dangling. | D. Mr. Fish |
| _____ | 5. joins Owen in watching Liberace. | E. Buzzy |
| _____ | 6. accuses Owen of anti-Semitism. | F. Hester |
| _____ | 7. refuses an interview with The Voice. | G. Tabby |
| _____ | 8. counsels Owen on the recurring dream. | H. Dr. Dolder |
| _____ | 9. parks on campus when he drinks. | I. Mitzy Lish |
| _____ | 10. wraps herself in the flag. | J. Giordano |
| _____ | 11. tells Owen about the Lady in Red and her dress. | K. Martha |
| _____ | 12. faints at the sound of Owen's cry. | L. Owen |
| _____ | 13. is jealous of Tabby's voice and figure. | M. Germaine |
| _____ | 14. develops a mental history. | N. Randolph White |
| _____ | 15. sleeps in John's other twin bed and leaves the night light on. | O. Mrs. Meany |

Part II: Short Answer (20 points)

Supply a word or phrase in answer to the following questions. Place your response in the blank provided.

- _____ 1. Who moves in with Hester after Owen leaves?
- _____ 2. Who writes, "Today's the day!"
- _____ 3. Whose breasts does Owen admire above other women?
- _____ 4. Who refuses to halt the prayer for Owen?
- _____ 5. What does Dick Jarvits hurl?
- _____ 6. Who denies that Owen was a virgin birth?
- _____ 7. Who carries a book by Thomas Aquinas?
- _____ 8. What does Owen find in the desk drawer?
- _____ 9. Who forgives Owen for mutilating Mary Magdalene?
- _____ 10. What does Owen steal from Hester?

A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

Part III: Multiple Choice (20 points)

Select the phrase that completes each of the following sentences. Place the letter of your response in the blank provided at left.

- _____ 1. The last diary entry
 - A. requests a soldier's medal.
 - B. notes Dick Jarvits' mental instability.
 - C. looks forward to heaven.
 - D. leaves the TV set to Owen.
- _____ 2. The playground gate
 - A. leads nowhere.
 - B. is guarded by "penguins" and Father Findlay.
 - C. admits Hester and other draft protesters.
 - D. closes on Owen, who welds the statue to the floor.
- _____ 3. Owen considers visting
 - A. Vietnam.
 - B. Nova Scotia.
 - C. Toronto.
 - D. Fort Huachuca.
- _____ 4. Owen insists that
 - A. the forklift operator tilt the head of the coffin.
 - B. John watch *The Robe*.
 - C. John's father is not worth locating.
 - D. the dream shows John dying with him.
- _____ 5. Owen chooses
 - A. Harvard over Yale.
 - B. the armadillo as his gift.
 - C. to swim from the boathouse into Lake Loveless.
 - D. to repeat the ninth grade.
- _____ 6. John eagerly awaits
 - A. a draft notice.
 - B. Reverend Wiggin's prayer for Owen.
 - C. the girls' response to humor in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.
 - D. the New York Times.
- _____ 7. Owen tries to excuse
 - A. Tabby's injury by the hailstone.
 - B. wetting his pants.
 - C. living with Hester.
 - D. Major Rawl for applying a tourniquet.
- _____ 8. *The Grave* supports
 - A. Dan's annual presentation of *A Christmas Carol*.
 - B. a protest march on Washington.
 - C. the hiring of a true educator.
 - D. Archibald Thorndike's re-emergence from retirement.
- _____ 9. John makes little attempt to
 - A. break the stained glass window.
 - B. conceal the murder weapon from Chief Pike.
 - C. welcome Dan into the family.
 - D. contact Buster Freebody.
- _____ 10. John is repulsed by
 - A. the task of burying Sagamore in the rosebed.
 - B. Hester's kiss.
 - C. Katherine Keeling's description of his failed love life.
 - D. Anglicanism.

A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Explain how Owen helps John improve his study and reading habits.
2. Contrast Owen's army experience with that of Major Rawls.
3. Account for John's limited success in the classroom.
4. Summarize events that disrupt the Christmas pageant.
5. Describe how fatherlessness affects John's childhood.

A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

ANSWER KEY

VOCABULARY TEST

- | | | |
|---------------|---------------|--------------|
| 1. vestry | 6. undermine | 11. carnal |
| 2. grotesque | 7. shoals | 12. adamant |
| 3. nativity | 8. conjugal | 13. chafed |
| 4. curmudgeon | 9. imposition | 14. abandon |
| 5. uniform | 10. genocide | 15. abutment |

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Character Identification (30 points)

- | | | |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. A | 6. O | 11. J |
| 2. G | 7. F | 12. C |
| 3. B | 8. I | 13. N |
| 4. L | 9. K | 14. M |
| 5. E | 10. D | 15. H |

Part II: True/False (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. T | 6. F |
| 2. T | 7. T |
| 3. F | 8. T |
| 4. F | 9. F |
| 5. F | 10. T |

Part III: Completion (20 points)

1. draft notice, diamond wheel
2. column, Reverend Merrill
3. Robert Frost, inaugural
4. Owen, Catholics
5. Boston, Merrill

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: Matching (30 points)

- | | | |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. L | 6. I | 11. J |
| 2. G | 7. N | 12. D |
| 3. F | 8. C | 13. K |
| 4. A | 9. H | 14. E |
| 5. B | 10. O | 15. M |

Part II: Short Answer (20 points)

- | | |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| 1. John | 6. Catholics |
| 2. Owen | 7. Owen |
| 3. Tabby | 8. baseball |
| 4. Rev. Merrill | 9. Father Findlay |
| 5. Chicom grenade | 10. panties |

Part III: Multiple Choice (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. C | 6. A |
| 2. A | 7. B |
| 3. B | 8. C |
| 4. A | 9. D |
| 5. D | 10. B |

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.

A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

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