

A.P. English John Irving Unit  
Mr. Averill Bio Data  
JOHN WINSLOW IRVING

1942 John Winslow Irving born at Exeter, New Hampshire  
1961 Graduates, Phillips Exeter Academy, where his stepfather was a teacher of Russian history. Irving was known more for his dedication to wrestling and writing than for academic achievement.  
1961-62 ..... Attends University of Pittsburgh (wrestling scholarship)  
1963-64 ..... Institute of European Studies, University of Vienna (Austria)  
1964 ..... In August, marries Shyla Leary  
1965 ..... Graduates Cum Laude, UNH, son Colin born  
1967 ..... MFA, University of Iowa (noted Iowa Writer's Workshop)  
1968 ..... *Setting Free the Bears* (A tale of two young men's adventures motorcycling through Austria)  
1969-71 ..... Resides in Putney, VT and Vienna, Austria  
1970 ..... Son Brendan born  
1972 ..... Rockefeller Foundation grant; *The Water Method Man* (about an Iowa graduate student's fantastic misadventures)  
1972-75 ..... Writer-in-residence, Iowa Writer's Workshop  
1974 ..... *The 158-Pound Marriage* (presenting two couples who engage in wife-swapping)  
1974-75 ..... NEA Fellowship  
1975-78 ..... Assistant professor of English, Mount Holyoke College  
1976-77 ..... Guggenheim Foundation grant  
1978 ..... *The World According to Garp* (a fanciful story of a wonderfully talented novelist whose life and works are rich and various but who is murdered at 33 by a disgruntled reader)  
1980 ..... *Garp* awarded American Book Award as best paperback novel of 1979  
1981 ..... *The Hotel New Hampshire* (portraying an exotic family) - separates from his wife Shyla  
1985 ..... *The Cider House Rules* (a polemic on abortion)  
1987 ..... Marries a Canadian, Janet Turnbull (Irving), a literary agent  
1989 ..... *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (a fable of political predestination)

Partly compiled from Harter and Thompson, JOHN IRVING. Twayne:Boston, 1986.

## Irving on Art

"Art has an aesthetic responsibility to be entertaining. The writer's responsibility is to take hard stuff and make it as accessible as the stuff can be made. Art and entertainment aren't contradictions. It's only been in the last decade, or twenty years, that there has somehow developed this rubric under which art is expected to be difficult. Why? On the basis of some sort of self-congratulation of the strenuousness required of us? This notion seems to me to be, frankly, a way of perpetuating the middleman, the academic who might be necessary to explain the difficult work for us. By creating a taste for literature that needs interpretation, we, of course, create jobs for reviewers, for critics, for the academy. I like books that can be read without those middlemen."

*Contemporary Literature* (Winter82)

Mr. Averill  
A.P. English  
The World According to Garp

## Information and Criticism

When I first encountered Irving through *The World According to Garp*, I was intrigued by the traditional elements of his fiction. One can hardly resist comparisons to Dickens for the breadth of scope, the diversity of characters, the improbabilities and coincidences, and the tradi-comic vision.

What carried the novel beyond Dickens, for me at least, was Irving's refusal to resolve his plots or to comfort the reader. In Irving, the darker side of things is always lurking. In Garp's marriage, there is the infidelity which he regrets almost instantly (as well as his wife's response, which is also as ironically and tragically acted out). The following are some amplifications of this idea in *Garp* which may be of some interest to you.

"While [Garp] gets his revenge on Bonkers for inflicting a childhood injury, and successfully enjoys his first real sexual experience with Cushie Percy, these activities will not be simply the normal processes of maturation for which few of us pay a dear price, but will establish a metaphorically predetermined chain of associations that ultimately demand an ironic form of poetic justice and come to define the fragile condition of existence in Irving's world." -- Harter and Thompson 1986

"It surprised him to realize that the Under Toad was no stranger, was not even mysterious; the Under Toad was very familiar -- as if he had always known it, as if he had grown up with it. It was yielding, like the warm wrestling mats; it smelled like the sweat of clean boys -- and like Helen, the first and last woman Garp loved. The Under Toad, Garp knew now, could even look like a nurse: a person who is familiar with death and trained to make practical responses to pain." *Garp* p. 575

"I have never understood why 'serious' and 'funny' are thought to be opposites. It is simply a truthful contradiction to me that people's problems are often funny and that the people are often and nonetheless sad. I am ashamed, however, that you think I am laughing at people, or making fun of them. I take people very seriously. People are all I take seriously, in fact. Therefore I have nothing but sympathy for how people behave -- and nothing but laughter to console them with. Laughter is my religion, Mrs. Poole." Garp in *Garp* p. 233

"You must be a sick man." Mrs. Poole in *Garp* p. 236

# A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

## Chapter One: The Foul Ball

### Characters:

John Wheelwright, Narrator, born out of wedlock  
Owen Meany, a small boy with a "wrecked" voice  
Tabitha Wheelwright, John's mother  
The Reverend Lewis Merrill  
John's Grandmother, Mrs. Harriet Wheelwright  
Lydia, Grandmother's former maid  
The Meany Family  
Aunt Martha and Uncle Alfred Eastman  
Mr. Chickering, the baseball coach

### Setting:

Gravesend, New Hampshire  
Boston, Massachusetts  
Toronto, Ontario, CANADA

### Point of View:

First person narration distanced chronologically and geographically.

### Tone:

Irving is noted for his serio-comic approach in all his works. His humor is almost always tinged with the awful inevitability of tragedy, disappointment, and failure. Note this tone in the treatment of The Foul Ball at the end of the chapter. What do you think Irving has done to heighten the tone?

### Questions:

1. What do you make of the references to religions (Catholic, Anglican, Episcopalian, Congregational) in the Chapter? What is Owen's belief? John's? What do we know about the Reverend Mr. Merrill.
2. What sort of family did Owen Meany come from? Why does he not consider himself material for Gravesend Academy?
3. Discuss John Wheelwright's family and personal history. What search is he involved in from the beginning of the novel? What is the function of all the "history" in the Chapter?
4. How do people react to Owen Meany? Consider John, his classmates, adults, coaches, and family.

A.P. English  
Mr. Averill

## A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

### Chapter Two: The Armadillo

5. Consider the title for the chapter. What do you know about the Armadillo, from the first moment that Dan Needham brings it to John until we see it at the end of the Chapter? What significance do we attach to its changes of condition? Do we know about it in current time? What role does the armadillo play in the reconciliation of Owen and John after John's mother's death?
6. John's cousins Noah, Simon, and Hester are important in this chapter. Discuss Hester. What effect does the treatment of Noah and Simon as a "unit" have on the meaning of the story? How does Owen relate to the cousins? What reasons do you think John has for not taking Owen to Sawyer Depot?
7. Dan Needham, who was only vaguely referred to in Chapter One, emerges as a key character in Chapter Two. Discuss the narrator's relationship with Dan, especially in the baseball card-armadillo exchange.
8. Reread the Biblical quote on pages 83-84. What does it contribute to the story? What does the reference to St. Paul add further?
9. Pages 87-93 involve references to key events in American history from 1962 to about 1971. Review each of the events and Owen Meany's reaction to them.
10. What argument is the Reverend Lewis Merrill involved in at the beginning of the chapter?
11. Discuss the sexuality of John's mother and of his cousin Hester (is she like another Hester, or is this an absolute reach?).
12. Characterize Uncle Alfred and Aunt Martha, in terms of their relationships to Tabitha and John.
13. What do we know about the narrator's life in Canada?
14. On page 87, Owen (and the armadillo) said, "GOD HAS TAKEN YOUR MOTHER. MY HANDS WERE THE INSTRUMENTS. GOD HAS TAKEN MY HANDS. I AM GOD'S INSTRUMENT" Say what?
15. "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 that he took my mother.



A.P. English  
Mr. Averill

## A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

### Chapter Four: The Little Lord Jesus

Consider the following questions:

16. What connections do you see among the following threads of plot that Irving weaves in *The Little Lord Jesus*: the Christmas pageant, the investigation of the abandoned dormitories, the maids, the death of Sagamore, and Owen's assumption of the roles of both Jesus and the Ghost of the Future?
17. Comment upon John's role as Joseph.
18. What is revealed by Owen's investigation of the rooms of the boys on vacation.
19. What does John find when he returns to Owen Meany's room to retrieve his = hat?
20. John tells us (p.186), "Of course, I know now that Owen didn't believe in coincidences. Owen Meany believed that 'coincidence' was a 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*." How does this observation fit the events of the chapter as a whole?
21. Why does Owen Meany reject the help of a voice coach in making his voice more normal and acceptable?
22. What evidence do we get of Owen's increasing presence in the year after he is responsible for Tabitha's death?
23. Discuss the comic elements of the Christmas pageant.
24. Considering elements from both this novel and *Garp*, what might be the significance of Lydia's condition? Who else is crippled?
25. Irving clubs us over the head with Owen=3DJesus, so much so that he can be accused of being too obvious. However, examining page 171, is anything at all subtle or understated about this treatment of Owen?
26. The interlude in Toronto on pp. 173-175 interrupts the setting and chronology of the story. To what purpose? Also consider the references to Catholicism in the chapter.
27. 12. Returning to the idea of coincidences, how (so far) does Irving's thinking about coincidence in *Owen Meany* differ from the feelings he expresses in *Garp*?
28. 13. What is the internal and external significance of Owen's declaration on page 151, "FATHER FORGIVE THEM, FOR THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO."
29. 14. What is revealed by Pastor Merrill's and Owen's behavior at the "funeral" of Sagamore? 181
30. 15. What is the significance of the Meany's crèche scene?

A.P. English  
Mr. Averill

## A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

### Chapter Five: The Ghost of the Future

31. John W. Irving is often compared to Dickens in terms of narrative technique. *Owen Meany* is replete with allusions to *A Christmas Carol*. Apart from the rather too obvious "It's Christmas!" what is there about the Dickens' story that fits the emerging vision we are getting of Owen?
32. John writes, "But I was just a Joseph; I felt that Owen Meany had already chosen me for the only part I could play." What does this reveal about his self-image?
33. On page 212, what opinions does Owen Meany express about Jesus Christ?
34. Owen Meany's reaction to the affections of Barb Wiggin are unfortunate. Apart from lurid titillation, why does Irving include this scene?
35. On page 220, Owen reacts to the appearance of his parents at the pageant. How and why? Does the reaction of his parents confirm Owen's actions, or are we left wondering what justifies his response? [see also p. 235]
36. What do we learn about John in pp. 221-226? How does Canon Mackie interpret John's interest in U.S. history?
37. Arthur and Amanda Dowling may remind you of characters from *Garp*. What function do they have in *Owen Meany*?
38. Now that he has become Christ, Owen takes on the powers of prophesy as *The Ghost of the Future*. What part of the revealed future does Owen not reveal to John?
39. PAUL OWEN MEANY, JUNIOR
40. At the end of the Chapter, the idea of LUST, [also critical to *Garp*], is reintroduced with John's feelings about Germaine and his desire to search for his father? What does Owen believe about lust (p. 253)?
41. How does John search for his father in this chapter?

A.P. English  
Mr. Averill

## A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

### Chapter Six: The Voice

42. The plot of Owen Meany develops significantly in this chapter as we see Owen receive the respect of his classmates at Gravesend Academy, the "love" of Hester, and the animosity of the new Headmaster, Randy White.
43. Owen and John's grandmother have similar tastes in television. Define this taste. How does it relate to Owen's voice as THE VOICE?
44. Discuss Liberace, and his significance to the concept of narrative distance in the novel (that is, compare the Liberace of the fifties with the Liberace of the eighties).
45. Reread the description of Dan on page 262-3. What does John find most admirable about his stepfather as a teacher?
46. Dan says, "Owen is smart... He's smarter than even he knows. But he is not worldly." What is the significance of this comment?
47. How is Hester abused by her family?
48. What act of friendship does Owen perform for John, with respect to his entering Gravesend Academy?
49. What specific criticisms of the Catholics and nuns does Owen make in this chapter?
50. Owen's reaction to The Ten Commandments with Charlton Heston is revealing. What does Owen say about miracles (p.272).
51. What is the basis for Owen's warning John that he probably does not want to find his father?
52. Describe the relationship between John Wheelwright and the Reverend Mrs. Keeling, the Headmistress of the Bishop Strachan School.
53. Allusions to other literary works are increasingly significant in this chapter. Specifically, please discuss allusions to the Bible, Tess of the D'Urbervilles, and Julius Caesar.
54. Who is sarcasm master and older woman master? Does this add to or detract from the heroic/religious characterization of him?
55. How do Owen's reactions (as the VOICE) to the cat mutilations, the drinking issues, and required church attendance begin to shape our views of Owen's morality?
56. Discuss THE SHOT ( look At p. 303).
57. Describe the humor in John's psychiatric counseling session. Why won't Owen visit the psychiatrist?
58. What is the major content of the religious lessons taught by the new professor/chaplain Lewis Merrill? Describe Owen's behavior in class.
59. Randy White represents a significant change in the leadership of Gravesend Academy. How? What is Owen's reaction to him?
60. What do Owen and John remember of Kennedy's inauguration day?
61. What warning does Dan Needham give to Owen Meany? How does John express the same warning?
62. In the Toronto sequences, what opinion does John Wheelwright express concerning Ronald Reagan and his administration?

A.P. English  
Mr. Averill

## A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

### Chapter Seven: The Dream

"YESTERDAY I WAS KICKED OUT OF SCHOOL. LAST NIGHT I HAD A DREAM. NOW I KNOW FOUR THINGS. I KNOW THAT MY VOICE DOESN'T CHANGE --- BUT I STILL DON'T KNOW WHY. I KNOW THAT I AM GOD'S INSTRUMENT. I KNOW WHEN I'M GOING TO DIE --- AND NOW A DREAM HAS SHOWN ME HOW I'M GOING TO DIE. I'M GOING TO BE A HERO! I TRUST THAT GOD WILL HELP ME, BECAUSE WHAT I'M SUPPOSED TO DO LOOKS VERY HARD" (416).

63. John says, "If you're God's instrument, Owen, how come you need my help to stuff a basketball?" What's his attitude?
64. Discuss Owen Meany as a college prospect.
65. Why did Owen Meany not drink? Does this remind you of the opinions expressed by any other characters or authors?
66. What do Owen and John learn at Jerrold's ?
67. What does Graham McSwiney reveal about John's mother?
68. How does McSwiney analyze Owen's voice? Does this give you a hint about how it sounds?
69. The New Year's Eves of the early sixties are discussed in this chapter. What purpose does this discussion serve?
70. How does Owen propose to discover if Dan is aware of Tabitha's secret life? Do you see Irving ironically commenting upon his own craft?
71. Pronounce Bishop Strachan (I obviously couldn't).
72. How does John Wheelwright evaluate Reagan's war on drugs?
73. The Lish incidents play an important role in the plot of *The Dream*. Discuss in terms of antisemitism, John Kennedy, morality, Owen's conversation with Mrs. Lish, and Randy White.
74. Define: MADE FOR TELEVISION & IS HE FOR REAL?
75. Describe the Volkswagen incident. Other than providing more reasons that Randy White will want to be rid of Owen, how does the incident further Irving's themes in the novel?
76. ISAIAH 5:20 - "WOE UNTO THEM THAT CALL EVIL GOOD AND GOOD EVIL."
77. Mary Magdalene: How does the statue parallel other parts of the novel?
78. John writes, "I have learned that the consequences of our past actions are always interesting; I have learned to view the present with a forward-looking eye."p. 407 What does this tell us about his craft in revealing the story (think Irving -- Wheelwright -- Events).
79. What is ROTC?
80. John writes, "I didn't know how to pray very well then -- I didn't even believe in prayer. If I were given the opportunity to pray for Owen Meany now, I could do a better job of it; knowing what I know now, I might be able to pray hard enough" (p. 415). What do you make of this comment? Look back on this after you finish the novel.

A.P. English  
Mr. Averill

## A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

### Chapter Eight: The Finger

In this Chapter, some of the implicit issues we have been discussing become explicit. The Armadillo is clarified (claws and fingers, *n'est-ce pas?*), and we now understand John's comment, "Owen gave me more than he ever took from me," which first appears at the end of Chapter Two. At the same time, the characters are no longer "kids," and the American History that John is relating becomes all the more critical to the content of the story.

81. When did Owen stop doing things for pleasure (420) and why?
82. Whom does Charlie Keeling call a "nonpracticing homosexual?" What does this phrase mean?
83. Owen says, "IF YOU ABOLISH THE DRAFT, MOST AMERICANS WILL SIMPLY STOP CARING ABOUT WHAT WE'RE DOING IN OTHER PARTS OF THE WORLD." From today's perspective, is Owen correct in his assessment?
84. How is Owen treated differently by the faculty at UNH than he was by those at Gravesend Academy?
85. Explain John's comment (439), "I was twenty-one and I was still a Joseph; I was a Joseph then, and I'm just a Joseph now." Relate this to his comments about his teaching at Bishop Strachan (see p. 458).
86. "...whenever I did run into him, he looked at me as if he knew something special about me (as if Owen had been talking about me to him, as if I were in Owen's damn dream, or so I imagined)." Who is the "him," and is John correct that John is in Owen's dream? Does this account for the observer's interest?
87. Evaluate Owen's proof of the existence of God on page 451.
88. Describe the dream that Owen has (pp. 471-475).
89. "'IT IS DIFFICULT TO DISTINGUISH THE INSURGENT FROM THE FRIENDLY POPULATION.' I couldn't help myself; I said: 'I hope you don't run into that problem in Indiana or Arizona.'" What is the context for the quote, and what is its significance?
90. What job does Owen get in the Army?
91. What does John want to do with his life.(p. 502)?
92. What is Owen's gift to John?
93. John's obsession with the news appears pathological, and Katherine Keeling encourages him to stop buying newspapers. John even agrees that a concern with nature would be more "real." What does Irving think? On what do you base your opinion? (See esp. pp. 451-453.)
94. After reading about black holes, John writes, "And I thought : That is about as far away from Earth as Owen Meany is; that is about as far away from Earth as I would like to be." What does this statement add to your understanding of John?
95. Who are Harry Hoyt and Buzzy Thurston and what roles do they play in the novel?
96. Why does Owen fail to get a combat assignment (think about this)?
97. How has Owen's summer work prepared him for his Army assignment?

A.P. English  
Mr. Averill

## A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

### Chapter Nine: The Shot

#### CLIMAX AND DENOUEMENT

98. What is the irony that John speaks about on p. 510?
99. How does Irving contrast the fates of Hester and John in *The Shot*?
100. Owen Meany makes two appearances to John after Owen's death. Discuss the circumstances and significance of each appearance.
101. pp. 518-519, Owen practically writes John's Master's thesis for him, providing the central thesis on Hardy. What is the thesis and how does it relate to the meaning of Owen Meany?
102. Examine the examples of wit on pp. 522-523. Are you as intellectually backward as the girls of Bishop Strachan?
103. What miracle leads the Reverend Mr. Merrill to a more certain faith?
104. Discuss the conflict between John Wheelwright and Eleanor Pribst.
105. On p. 535, Owen's copy of Thomas Aquinas includes a selection on "Demonstration of God's Existence from Motion." How does this passage support the themes of the novel?
106. What "secret" does Mr. Meany reveal to John about Owen's birth? What has been the reaction of the priests to whom Mr. Meany has told the story? How does this explain Owen's feelings about the Catholics?
107. Owen Meany told the Reverend Mr. Merrill, "I WANT YOU TO SAY A PRAYER FOR ME." What prayers does he say at the funeral? In what sense is the book a prayer?
108. What is John's reaction to the discovery of his true father?
109. Describe Mrs. Meany's death and its symbolic value.
110. What is the importance of the description on p. 581-582? Remember that John has just told the reader that description is too often overlooked.
111. Discuss the ways in which Owen's death has been foreshadowed.
112. Was I correct that Owen Meany is a hopeful novel, compared with what you know of *Garp* and *Hotel New Hampshire*?