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Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

A Prayer for Owen Meany

by John Irving

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A Prayer For Owen Meany

To The Teacher

In order to allow the teacher maximum flexibility in his or her approach, we have grouped the prompts by sections. The teacher may, therefore, assign specific prompts or allow the students to select one or more prompts from each section

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Response Journal

To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

Response Sheet

Name_____ Section_____ Date_____

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Chapter 1

The Foul Ball

1. Owen Meany's physical differences are vividly described when the narrator relates the children's game of "lifting" Owen in Sunday school. Individuals who are different strike us strongly, especially when we are children who have not yet encountered a wide variety of people. In a paragraph, describe the first person that seemed very different to you when you were a child. The difference need not be physical, as Owen's is. For example, you could write about the first person who you knew was much wealthier or much poorer than you. Include at least one sentence about how that person's difference made you feel.
2. When Owen hides while swimming in the quarry and no one rushes to find him and make sure he hasn't drowned, he yells, "YOU LET ME DROWN!" and "REMEMBER THAT: YOU LET ME DIE." Pretend you are one of the kids Owen accuses. Choose one of the following situations, explaining why you feel that way:
 1. Write a letter to Owen defending yourself that begins, "No, Owen, I didn't let you die..."
 2. Write Owen a letter agreeing with him that begins, "Yes, Owen, I let you die..."
3. Johnny's grandmother is upset when his mother leaves the Congregational church for her new husband's Episcopal one, taking Johnny with her. It is not the differences in the churches' teachings that bother her, but the fact that the Wheelwrights have a long tradition of attending the Congregational church. To her, it is one of the things that defines what being a Wheelwright is. Make a list of at least three traditions that are important to your family—for example, "All the men in my family play football," or "We are all vegetarians." Choose one tradition from your list of three and imagine that you are going to break with that tradition. Write a paragraph that describes the ways you think your family members will react.

Response Journal

4. Irving writes, “Your memory is a monster; *you* forget—*it* doesn’t”; he also writes, “You think you have a memory, but it has you!” Write a poem that explores one of these statements. If you have trouble getting started, use “Your memory is a monster” or “You think you have a memory, but it has you!” as a first line.
5. Johnny’s first feeling after his mother’s death is anger at her for never having told him who his father is. Think of someone close to you. If that person were to die tonight, what one thing would you regret never learning from the person? What one thing would you regret not telling the person? Write a short letter or e-mail to the person asking the one question you regretted not asking, and telling the one thing you regretted not telling.
6. Owen bikes off immediately after hitting the baseball that kills Tabby, and he seems unable to talk about the accident with Johnny. Assume that Owen keeps a diary and records in it his feelings about the accident. Pretend you are Owen and write his diary entry for the day of Tabby’s death.

Chapter 2

The Armadillo

7. Johnny says that his mother was “born into the entirely wrong body” and that she was “of an entirely different character than her appearance would suggest.” Write a descriptive paragraph about someone you know, whose appearance does not seem to fit his or her personality. Write a second paragraph about yourself, and why you think your appearance does or does not fit your personality.

A Prayer For Owen Meany

8. The Boston & Maine is mysterious and significant to Johnny; it is the train on which his mother meets both Johnny's father and her husband, Dan Needham. Write a brief scene describing the place where your parents (or grandparents) met, and what their first conversation might have been like. If you don't know the story, ask them. Start with a description of the setting, then move on to dialogue. For example:

The smoking car of the Boston & Maine glows as the sunset fills its windows; a smoke trail from Tabitha's cigarette rises through the orange light. A tall man awkwardly angles his way through the car, surprising himself by stopping suddenly when he reaches Tabitha's seat.

DAN: Is there room on this seat for a man—and his armadillo?

9. Dan uses props—in this chapter, an armadillo—to focus his theatre students' attention and make them think creatively. Imagine you are a theatre coach and want to use props in this way. List ten props that you think will fascinate and challenge your students.

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

10. Of his cousins, Johnny says, "I lived a different life whenever I was with them." Most of us have known a person or group of people around whom we feel different; living a different life. Write a paragraph about the ways in which you change when you're with such a person or group. Is the break from your usual life and behavior exhilarating? Exhausting? A little of both, as it is for Johnny?

Response Journal

11. Owen develops a deep attachment to the armadillo, worrying about its safety and devising ways to be able to take it home with him. Imagine what it is that makes the armadillo so meaningful to Owen. Write a paragraph from Owen's point of view explaining why he is drawn to it. If you like, start with "When I look at it, I see..."
12. The morning after Tabitha's death, Owen gives Johnny his most prized collection of baseball cards. To show that he is so sorry, he is willing to sacrifice his most important possession if it will make Johnny feel better. If you were in a situation similar to Owen's, what one possession of yours would you give your friend? In a paragraph, name the possession and describe why it is as important to you as the baseball cards are to Owen.

Chapter 3

The Angel

13. When Owen says that he's seen an angel in Tabby's room, Johnny assumes Owen mistook the dressmaker's dummy for an angel. As it turns out, Owen recognized the dummy for what it was and believes he saw an angel as well. Unlike Johnny, Owen clearly has no trouble believing in angels. Write a paragraph on your own feelings about angels and other supernatural beings. Explain why you do or do not believe in them.
14. Johnny prefers Pastor Merrill to Rector Wiggin because Merrill admits to having his own doubts and fears. Owen prefers Wiggin, who appears to have no doubts and never presents himself as vulnerable. Write a paragraph stating which style of leadership you prefer and why. Merrill and Wiggin are religious leaders, but you may apply the question to political leaders, military leaders, or another group of your choosing.

A Prayer For Owen Meany

15. Irving often mentions that Owen's voice is "funny" or "awful," but he shies away from providing a more vivid description of what it sounds like—perhaps in order to leave it up to the reader's imagination. Using your imagination, write a poem vividly describing Owen's voice and the way it makes you feel when you hear it. If you like, title your poem "The Voice."
16. Johnny observes that "from the moment Owen hit that ball, Mr. Meany wouldn't 'interfere' with *anything* Owen wanted." In this chapter, Mr. Meany quietly does whatever Owen commands. Imagine you are Mr. Meany and someone has asked you why you always give in to your son. Write a short explanation of why you treat Owen the way you do.
17. To the citizens of Gravesend, the crack of a bat hitting a baseball has become a horrible sound; it will always remind them of Tabby's sudden death. Write a descriptive paragraph about a sound that stirs up vivid memories for you.

Chapter 4

The Little Lord Jesus

18. Owen longs to visit Sawyer Depot even though Johnny insists it's no big deal. In a paragraph, write about a place you longed to visit as a child but never had a chance to go to. What made the place sound so appealing to you? Do you still want to go there?
19. When Owen and Johnny explore Gravesend Academy's deserted dorm rooms over the winter break, Owen insists that he can divine the students' personalities from what he finds in their rooms, including whether or not they are happy. Write a scene in which Owen and Johnny visit your bedroom while you are out. Mention at least three things Owen finds there and the conclusions he draws from them about your personality. End the scene with Owen's verdict on whether or not you are happy.

Response Journal

20. In this chapter, Owen takes over the casting of the Christmas pageant. Imagine that you are casting a film adaptation of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. Choose an actor for each of the “roles” listed below. In addition to the actors’ names, write down a few notes as to why you feel they are the best choices for the roles.

Owen Meany—

Hester—

Dan Needham—

Rector Wiggin—

Pastor Merrill—

Tabby Wheelright—

21. Owen believes there are no coincidences and that everything that happens is “meant to be” and is shaped by greater forces than we are. Some people find this point of view comforting; it takes the burden of guilt from our shoulders by suggesting that no matter what we do, things will turn out the way they are destined to. Others find the notion that everything is predetermined is stifling and depressing, as it implies that nothing we do has any significant impact on the course of events; that we can’t prevent something that is “meant to happen.” In a paragraph, describe your reaction to the idea that nothing is coincidental and all is part of a greater plan. Make sure to mention whether or not you subscribe to the idea yourself.
22. Johnny dashes into the Meany house to retrieve his hat and Mrs. Meany—who is known for her silence and refusal to leave her house—says softly, “I’m sorry about your poor mother.” Johnny leaves before she can say anything else. Imagine that Johnny stays, and now that she has started speaking, Mrs. Meany begins to talk as if she can’t stop, telling Johnny about her life and what has made her the way she is. Write a two-paragraph monologue for Mrs. Meany in which you flesh out her story as Irving has not.

Chapter 5

The Ghost of the Future

23. Johnny is jealous of the attention Owen receives from Hester and appalled at the way Owen treats Mr. Meany. He also credits Owen with ruining Christmases forever. Given all this, why do you think Johnny continues to consider Owen his best friend? As Johnny, write a paragraph describing what draws you to Owen and why you still value his friendship.
24. It is at Christmas that Johnny feels his mother's absence most acutely. Imagine losing the person you are currently closest to. At what time of year would the loss bother you the most? Explain your answer.
25. In the midst of one of his rants about America, John says, "Every American should be forced to live outside the United States for a year or two." Suppose that you are in a position to make one thing mandatory for all Americans with the ultimate goal of making them better world citizens. Write a paragraph describing what you would have Americans do and what you think it would accomplish.
26. Johnny describes Arthur and Amanda Dowling as "a couple with a theme." List three couples you know and what their "themes" might be.
27. Owen has a vision in which he sees his name and the date of his death on a gravestone. Would you want to know the date and manner of your death in advance? Write a paragraph explaining your answer.
28. Poet Cesar Vallejo wrote a poem beginning "I shall die in Paris, in a rain-storm...doubtless on a Thursday, like today, in autumn" (from "Black Stone on Top of a White Stone"). Poet W.S. Merwin's poem "For the Anniversary of My Death" begins "Every year without knowing it I have passed the day." Write a poem in which you imagine the day of your death. If you like, begin with Merwin's first line or Vallejo's "I shall die in..."

Chapter 6

The Voice

29. John's grandmother thinks that television is the ultimate indication of America's "mental and moral deterioration." Some people have made similar claims about the Internet. Imagine that Harriet Wheelwright lives in the "Internet era" and spends all of her time surfing the web instead of watching television. Using what knowledge Irving has given us of Harriet, make up and list the following: Harriet's e-mail address (with a creative user name), Harriet's home page URL (with an appropriate domain name), and the URLs of Harriet's five favorite websites.
30. As "The Voice" of Gravesend Academy's newspaper, Owen writes a series of controversial articles criticizing the school's policies and practices. Pretend you are "The Voice" of your school and write a two-paragraph article critiquing some aspect of life there that you find lacking.
31. Many Gravesend Academy students are given nicknames that reveal something about their talents or characteristics. For example, we learn that Owen is called "Sarcasm Master;" other students are called everything from "Zit Master" to "Ice Master." John makes a point of mentioning that no one finds a nickname for him. Imagine that you are a student at Gravesend. Write a paragraph that reveals your nickname and why you are called by it. If you don't think your fellow students would choose a nickname for you (as they don't for John), write a paragraph about why you think they would not.
32. "My friend, my teacher" is how John describes Owen in this chapter. Sometimes it seems as though we learn even more from our friends than we do from our parents and teachers. In a paragraph, describe the most important or useful thing you have learned from a friend.

A Prayer For Owen Meany

33. John asserts that “American people reserve their moral condemnation for sexual misconduct” rather than, for example, shady arms deals such as the Iran-Contra affair. Pretend you are with John and respond to his claim as if continuing a conversation. For example: “I agree, John—look at what happened with Bill Clinton,” etc. Make your response a paragraph long, then write a one or two-sentence “reply” from John.
34. John says that President Reagan and certain others who call themselves Christians are “enough to drive a *real* Christian crazy!” The most outspoken or attention-getting members of any group (whether Christians, communists, or otherwise) often come to define the group in the public’s eye, even though their behavior might be offensive to the majority of people in that group (and “drive them crazy”). Think of a group of which you are a member; one that is important to you. It could be as broad as “Americans,” “teenagers,” or as specific as “Hindus” or “animal rights’ activists.” In one paragraph, consider the qualities and beliefs you think sincere (or “real,” as John says) members of that group demonstrate. In a second paragraph, reflect on how you think the group is perceived by society at large.
35. After hearing Kennedy’s speech, Owen is inspired to change his attitude: “NO MORE SARCASM MASTER. NO MORE CYNICAL, NEGATIVE, SMART-ASS, ADOLESCENT BULLSHIT!” Write a paragraph about a person who has inspired you to change yourself for the better. What is it that this person makes you want to improve?

Chapter 7

The Dream

36. In this chapter, Johnny reacts to Jerrold's news: "I was trembling. My mother was a singer—in some *joint!* She was someone called 'The Lady in Red'! She'd had a *career*—in *nightlife!*" Imagine that someone you're close to and think you know inside and out has a secret career as an entertainer, and you have just discovered it. Are you at all proud of the person, or does the fact of the betrayal override everything else? Are you interested in or disgusted by the thought of seeing the person perform? Write a diary entry in which you address these questions and describe how learning the secret has made you feel.
37. Owen says, "WE HAVE A GENERATION OF PEOPLE WHO ARE ANGRY TO LOOK FORWARD TO." What sort of generation do you think we have to look forward to now as you read this? Make a statement in Owen's style and write a paragraph supporting it with your observations about our current state of affairs.
38. Owen is shocked and let down when he learns that President Kennedy is sleeping with Marilyn Monroe. Write a paragraph about a time when you were disappointed in someone you admired by something they said or did.
39. By this chapter, Owen and Hester are firmly established as a couple. Though Hester has been portrayed as extremely sexually desirable from the novel's start, Owen is far from conventional as a romantic lead. What do you think Hester sees in Owen? As Hester, write a letter to a friend in which you describe your new boyfriend Owen and what draws you to him.

A Prayer For Owen Meany

40. Owen and Harriet are fond of the expression “MADE FOR TELEVISION,” which they use to describe any current event that seems to be, for lack of a better term, “full of it”—especially when they think it relates to a case of the government trying to manipulate the larger population. Make a list of no less than five events of recent years that Owen or Harriet might say were “made for television.”
41. According to his vision, Owen will be a first lieutenant when he dies. Rather than staying as far away from the military as possible in an attempt to thwart his fate, Owen signs up for ROTC. As Owen, write a diary entry in which you explain why you chose this course of action.

Chapter 8 The Finger

42. Owen makes a lengthy, detailed comparison between Marilyn Monroe and America as it was in 1962. Write a poem in which you liken the country (or the world, if you prefer) as it is now to a famous person. Mention at least eight ways in which the person you choose and the country are similar.
43. Owen challenges John to explain how he knows that the statue of Mary Magdalene is still there even when he can no longer see it. John's answer—“because I just *know!*”—is not very convincing. Put yourself in John's place and respond to Owen's question more thoroughly and thoughtfully. Write a paragraph explaining how you know that the statue is still there. If you prefer, write a paragraph explaining how you *cannot* know that the statue is still there.
44. Owen thinks it's ridiculous of *The Toronto Daily Star* to ask American immigrants to make assimilation (fitting into Canadian life) their first priority. Do you agree with Owen or with the *Star*? Write a letter to the editor of the *Star* expressing your opinion as to what the first priority of asylum-seeking immigrants should be.

Response Journal

45. Owen asks John, “DO YOU WANT TO SPEND THE REST OF YOUR LIFE IN CANADA—THINKING ABOUT WHAT YOUR COUNTRY *DID* TO YOU?” At the time, John says that he doesn’t; this, however, is exactly how he spends at least the next twenty years. Imagine Owen can write the 40-yr-old John a letter. How would Owen advise, and what would he think of the grown John? As Owen, write such a letter.
46. Consider the following: “John is a coward.” In two paragraphs, drawing on everything you have learned about John up to and through this chapter, either agree or disagree with the above statement.

Chapter 9

The Shot

47. Irving gives us a list of Hester the Molester’s song titles: “Drivin’ with No Hands,” “Gone to Arizona,” “No Church, No Country, No More,” “Just Another Dead Hero,” “I Don’t Believe in No Soul,” “You Won’t See Me at His Funeral,” “Life After You,” “Why the Boys Want Me,” “Your Voice Convinces Me,” and “There’s No Forgettin’ Nineteen Sixty-eight.” Choose one of these titles and write the song’s lyrics as you imagine Hester would have. Include at least three verses and a refrain.
48. Owen and John are skeptical about the effectiveness of anti-war demonstrations, while Hester is passionately committed to attending them. What is your opinion on the impact such demonstrations and marches can make? Imagine that, like Hester, you are absolutely horrified by a decision your government has made. In a paragraph or two, state whether or not you would engage in some form of protest (and why) and identify which method of protest (for example: petitioning, marching, writing letters to your representatives, boycotting, etc.) you think would be the most likely to have an effect on the course of events.

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49. John finds the experience of finally learning who his father is disappointing and anticlimactic. As a reader who was equally in the dark as to the identity of John's father, how did you feel when you learned who he is? Write a short letter to author John Irving in which you mention whether you were or were not surprised by John's father's identity, and whether or not the revelation felt anticlimactic to you.
50. On the first page of the novel, John tells us that Owen is the reason he believes in God. In Chapter 9, we find out that witnessing Owen's "miracle" is what converts John. Throughout the novel, however, Owen's main point about faith is that it shouldn't depend on "proof" or "miracles"; to have faith is to believe when there is no proof. As Owen, write a letter to John in which you comment on John's faith and how John acquired it. Before you start, decide whether you think Owen would be pleased that John believes (no matter how John came to his belief) or if he would question the idea that John believes at all.
51. As a boy and as a young man, John is portrayed as rather bland and average—a "Joseph," as Irving puts it—yet someone as singular as Owen loves John as his "BEST FRIEND." Why do you think Owen is so fond of and loyal to John? As Owen, write a diary entry in which you explain what you love about John.
52. Owen spends what he knows will be his last living day lolling around the hotel pool with John, reminiscing about the past, eating large meals, and drinking beer. In a paragraph, describe how you would have spent your last day if you were Owen (if you'd spend it exactly as Owen does, tell why). In another paragraph, describe how you'd spend your last day if you knew you were about to die.

Response Journal

W r a p - U p

53. After finishing the novel, how do you feel about the title *A Prayer for Owen Meany*? Write a paragraph in which you argue that Irving's title is or is not a great and fitting title for the book. Afterwards—whatever your opinion on Irving's title—make up and write down two alternate titles for the book.
54. Imagine that you are asked to star in a film version of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. Assume that your gender and appearance are not factors. Which character would you most like to play, and why?
55. Write a short review of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, rating the book on a scale from 1 (not good) to 5 (wonderful). Mention your favorite part (and why), your favorite character (and why), and whether or not you would recommend the book to others.
56. The ending of this story could be considered sad. Can you think of a better ending, or do you think this is a good ending because it is appropriate?
57. Sequels are popular because readers wish to know more about the characters. For what reason do you think this book should, or should not, have a sequel?
58. If you were to tell a friend what you think the message of this novel is, what would it be?
59. If you were to choose one character from this novel to be your husband or wife, who would it be? In your answer, give a least five reasons why you have made this choice. Be sure that your answer is written in complete sentences.
60. Write Owen's will.

A Prayer For Owen Meany

Test

1. Owen believes there is no such thing as
 - A. an angel.
 - B. a coincidence.
 - C. a Flying Yankee.
 - D. a beetleskin.
 - E. a non-speaking part.

2. When Hester becomes a rock star, she is known as
 - A. The Voice.
 - B. Mary Magdalene.
 - C. Hester Huachuca.
 - D. Watahantowet.
 - E. Hester the Molester.

3. Tabby's accompanist at The Orange Grove is
 - A. Buster Freebody.
 - B. Jerrold.
 - C. The Lady in Red.
 - D. Lewis Merrill.
 - E. Mr. McSwiney.

4. Owen is kicked out of Gravesend Academy for
 - A. getting the basketball team to put Dr. Dolder's VW on the Great Hall stage.
 - B. propositioning Larry Lish's mother.
 - C. beheading the statue of Mary Magdalene.
 - D. calling for Headmaster White's dismissal in *The Grave*.
 - E. making phony draft cards.

Response Journal

5. The Christmas pageant in which Owen plays Jesus is directed by
 - A. Mr. Fish.
 - B. Dan Needham.
 - C. Barb Wiggin.
 - D. Harriet Wheelright.
 - E. the Brinker-Smiths.

6. Owen's college tuition is covered by
 - A. a full scholarship.
 - B. Harriet Wheelwright.
 - C. the Army.
 - D. Randy White.
 - E. the staff of *The Grave*.

7. In Vietnam, Harry Hoyt's death is caused by
 - A. a grenade.
 - B. a snake bite.
 - C. napalm.
 - D. friendly fire.
 - E. a sexually transmitted disease.

8. John writes his Master's thesis on
 - A. Bishop Strachan.
 - B. Thomas Hardy.
 - C. Robertson Davies.
 - D. Margaret Atwood.
 - E. Owen Meany.

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9. At the time John is writing, it is
A. 1987.
B. 1968.
C. 1952.
D. 1963.
E. 1958.
10. John's first crush is on
A. Caroline O'Day.
B. Mary Beth Baird.
C. Marilyn Monroe.
D. Hester.
E. Germaine.
11. Owen's pen name for *The Grave* is
A. Pack-a-day Meany.
B. Sarcasm Master.
C. Slam-Dunk Master.
D. The Shot.
E. The Voice.
12. John's biological father is
A. Lewis Merrill.
B. Mr. Fish.
C. Dan Needham.
D. Dudley Wiggin.
E. Buster Freebody.

Response Journal

13. In *A Christmas Carol*, John plays
- A. Scrooge.
 - B. The Ghost of the Future.
 - C. no one; John is not in the play.
 - D. Joseph.
 - E. Marley's ghost.
14. As an adult, John is
- A. a Congregationalist.
 - B. an Anglican.
 - C. an Episcopalian.
 - D. a Catholic.
 - E. a Baptist.
15. John has a hard time understanding why Owen likes
- A. Hester.
 - B. Liberace.
 - C. Kennedy.
 - D. Marilyn Monroe.
 - E. Tabby.
16. At the time of his death, Owen is a
- A. 2nd lieutenant.
 - B. major.
 - C. 1st lieutenant.
 - D. recruit.
 - E. rector.

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17. Owen and John practice “The Shot” until they can do it in
A. under three seconds.
B. under four seconds.
C. under two seconds.
D. under five seconds.
E. under a second.
18. At Tabby’s wedding reception, Owen gains possession of
A. the dummy.
B. Hester’s hair ribbon.
C. the baseball.
D. Hester’s panties.
E. the armadillo.
19. Every New Year’s Eve, Hester
A. gets drunk and passes out.
B. gets drunk and throws up.
C. gets stoned and throws up.
D. gets drunk and comes on to John.
E. gets drunk and makes resolutions.
20. *DOONG SA* and *NAM SOON* are
A. cities in Vietnam.
B. Vietnamese initiatives.
C. Vietnamese phrases Owen uses.
D. the leaders of North and South Vietnam.
E. Vietnamese weapons.

A Prayer For Owen Meany

Test
Student Answer Sheet

Name: _____

1. _____

11. _____

2. _____

12. _____

3. _____

13. _____

4. _____

14. _____

5. _____

15. _____

6. _____

16. _____

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Response Journal

An Annotated Bibliography on Response Journals

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A Prayer For Owen Meany

Test
Answer Key

1. B

2. E

3. A

4. E

5. C

6. C

7. B

8. B

9. A

10. D

11. E

12. A

13. C

14. B

15. B

16. C

17. A

18. D

19. B

20. C

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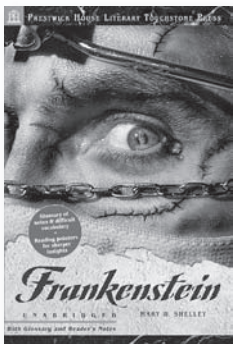
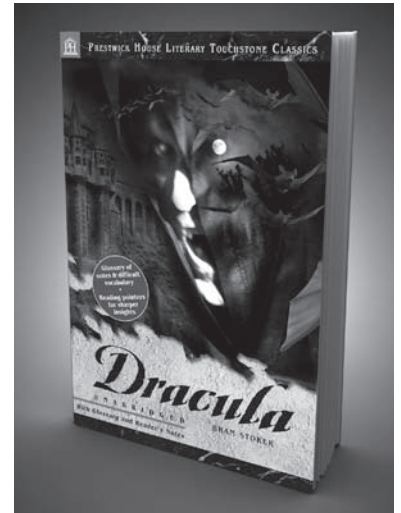
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