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Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

A Prayer for Owen Meany

by John Irving

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A Prayer for Owen Meany

Objectives

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

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

10. point out examples of the author's use of doubles and secondary characters, who exhibit the same traits as the primary characters, in order to enhance understanding.
11. discuss Owen as a symbol for the connection between man as a sexual, emotional being and God as a spiritual being; consider Owen's appearance, presence, and sexuality.
12. understand the following additional symbols in the story: the quarry, the color red, the closet at 80 Front Street, and dandelions.
13. point out the significance of names in this story.
14. write a character sketch of Owen, detailing instances from his life which contribute to his beliefs; include the reasons for his faithful belief in God and his belief that he is God's instrument.
15. recognize examples of epithets used in the story to describe Owen; point out which aspects of his personality these epithets delineate.
16. discuss the irony in Reverend Merrill's restored faith.
17. discuss the reasons for John's criticism of American politics and point out the irony in his refusal to learn about Canadian politics.
18. point out the significance of the title of this novel as it relates to the theme.
19. write a character sketch of Hester, discussing her relationship with Owen, John, and her parents; comment on how her adult life is her way of making the best of her "mutations and disfigurements."
20. point out examples of humor in the story.
21. discuss John's view of the moral decay of America and the consequences of this decay that he foresees for future generations.
22. relate the ways in which the following help to illustrate America's moral decay: John F. Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe, the television set.
23. define vocabulary words from the story.
24. discuss the ways the author creates and maintains the reader's interest through characterization, foreshadowing, and plot.

25. discuss Owen's relationship with Tabitha and the impact her death has on his life.
26. discuss the descriptions of baseball, America's pastime, as a metaphor for American life.
27. comment on the effectiveness of the use of capital letters for all of Owen's dialogue in the story and how this technique enhances his characterization.
28. define and find examples in *A Prayer For Owen Meany* of the following literary terms:
 - symbol
 - irony
 - foreshadowing
 - hyperbole
 - theme
 - allusion
 - epithet

A Prayer for Owen Meany

Test

Multiple Choice

1. Owen's family switches from the Catholic Church to the Episcopal Church because
 - A. Owen wants to go to the same church as his best friend, John.
 - B. of some "unspeakable outrage."
 - C. Owen refuses to attend the parochial school.
 - D. Both A and B
 - E. A, B, and C
2. Owen can be described as
 - A. being unusually small for his age.
 - B. having a strange voice.
 - C. being a social outcast.
 - D. Both A and B
 - E. A, B, and C
3. When Owen returns the armadillo to Johnny without its claws, he is saying
 - A. he would cut off his hands for Johnny if he could.
 - B. he feels terrible that his hands held the bat that hit the fated ball.
 - C. that their friendship is broken but can be repaired, just like the claws can be glued back onto the armadillo.
 - D. Both A and B
 - E. A, B, and C
4. Owen remains in Tabitha's room after he thinks he sees an angel
 - A. because he is afraid to return to his own bed.
 - B. because he does not want Johnny to know that he wet his pants.
 - C. because he wants to protect Tabitha in case the angel is the Angel of Death.
 - D. Both A and B
 - E. A, B, and C
5. The dressmaker's dummy in this story represents
 - A. mankind's helplessness against fate, which includes the loss of loved ones.
 - B. everyone's memories of Tabitha.
 - C. the triumph of an individual's free will over God's will.
 - D. Both A and B
 - E. A, B, and C

6. "It was Owen Meany who kept me out of Vietnam – a trick that only Owen could have managed." (Pg. 93) This passage is an example of
- A. symbolism.
 - B. imagery.
 - C. characterization.
 - D. foreshadowing.
 - E. allusion.
7. Which of the following statements about Owen's beliefs is true?
- A. Owen sometimes doubts God's existence.
 - B. Owen believes that his strange voice is a punishment from God.
 - C. Owen thinks there are no coincidences because God shapes everyone's life.
 - D. Both A and B
 - E. A, B, and C
8. Owen's two parts in the Christmas pageant are similar because
- A. they both need an actor with the ability to take command of the stage without words.
 - B. they both require a short, small actor.
 - C. Owen does not want to play either role.
 - D. Both A and B
 - E. A, B, and C
9. It is ironic that John has strong, disturbing opinions concerning American politics because
- A. Canadians distrust strong opinions; by obsessing over American politics, John is behaving more like an American than a Canadian.
 - B. he is too cowardly to fight in the Vietnam War.
 - C. he claims to have loved Owen, but Owen never criticizes American politics.
 - D. Both A and B
 - E. A, B, and C
10. Which of the following epithets applies to Owen?
- A. Sarcasm Master
 - B. Prince of Peace
 - C. The Granite Mouse
 - D. Both A and B
 - E. A, B, and C
11. Owen demonstrates his friendship for Johnny by
- A. attending Gravesend High School for one year before entering the academy.
 - B. cutting off John's finger.
 - C. teaching Johnny how to overcome dyslexia.
 - D. breaking up with Hester.
 - E. A, B, and C

12. Because Owen “knows” his fate, he
- A. refuses to get his voice fixed.
 - B. insists on practicing “The Shot.”
 - C. joins the ROTC.
 - D. Both A and B
 - E. A, B, and C
13. Owen is expelled from the Gravesend Academy for
- A. bolting the statue of Mary Magdalene to the stage.
 - B. suggesting that the basketball players place the Volkswagen on the stage.
 - C. being “The Voice” and writing scathing criticisms of Randolph White’s policies.
 - D. selling fake draft cards.
 - E. propositioning Mrs. Lish.
14. In Owen’s opinion
- A. there is no good way to win the Vietnam War.
 - B. Americans are protesting the Vietnam War only because they are afraid of the draft.
 - C. if he were to be sent to Vietnam he might be able to keep idiots like Harry Holt from getting killed.
 - D. the Vietnam War proves America’s power.
 - E. A, B, and C
15. Before he leaves for Arizona, Owen
- A. gives his commencement speech.
 - B. asks Hester to marry him.
 - C. gives Dan the dressmaker’s dummy.
 - D. Both A and B
 - E. A, B, and C
16. After Owen’s death, John believes he “hears” Owen’s voice
- A. in the secret closet at 80 Front Street.
 - B. when Owen seems to possess the body of Reverend Merrill.
 - C. at night in his dreams.
 - D. Both A and B
 - E. A, B, and C
17. It is ironic that
- A. Owen is killed by a grenade.
 - B. Reverend Merrill refuses to believe in Owen’s miraculous death but regains his faith from a prank.
 - C. Owen drives a red pickup truck.
 - D. Both A and B
 - E. A, B, and C

18. Reverend Merrill stutters
- A. when he tells a lie.
 - B. only when he is near John.
 - C. when he begins to lose faith and doubt the existence of God.
 - D. Both A and B
 - E. A, B, and C
19. When John says his Prayer for Owen Meany, he is praying
- A. that Owen is in heaven.
 - B. for God to give Owen back to the world.
 - C. to say “thank you” to Owen for helping him to believe in God.
 - D. Both A and B
 - E. A, B, and C
20. Which of the following vocabulary words accurately describes Owen?
- A. addleheaded
 - B. curmudgeon
 - C. fatalistic
 - D. palaver
 - E. provincial

Essay (Answer any two)

1. Some critics believe that the character of Owen is a symbol for the connection between man's earthly and spiritual existence. State whether or not you agree with this theory. Cite specific incidents from the story to support your opinion.
2. A coming-of-age novel is one in which the main character grows, matures, or understands the world in adult terms. Select either John or Owen and discuss the extent to which *A Prayer for Owen Meany* is a coming-of-age novel. Consider emotional, sexual, and spiritual maturity of the character when answering this question. Cite specifics from the story to support your conclusions.
3. "I am doomed to remember a boy with a wrecked voice – not because of his voice, or because he was the smallest person I ever knew, or even because he was the instrument of my mother's death, but because he is the reason I believe in God." (Pg. 1)

Some critics believe that the purpose of this novel is to chronicle the awakening of John's belief in God. Relate three specific incidents from the story demonstrating how Owen influences John's belief in God.

4. Define "faith" the way John as an adult understands it. Be sure to include his opinion of miracles and the extent to which he thinks man has free will. Cite incidents from the story to support your answer.

A Prayer for Owen Meany

Test Answer Key

1. B	6. D	11. E	16. D
2. D	7. C	12. E	17. B
3. D	8. A	13. D	18. C
4. C	9. A	14. E	19. B
5. D	10. E	15. A	20. C

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Find five vocabulary words that can be used to describe Owen and five words for John.
2. Why is John writing this memoir?
3. For what reasons does Owen believe that he is God's instrument on earth? Cite incidents from the story which serve to reinforce this belief for Owen.
4. State the significance of the following names in the story: Meany, Gravesend, Tabby, John, Wheelwright, Hester, Simon, Noah, Needham.
5. If you have read *The Scarlet Letter*, discuss the ways Hester the Molester is similar to Hester in Hawthorne's novel.
6. Find at least five epithets in this story which help to delineate Owen's personality.
7. Discuss the significance of the title of the novel.
8. What steps does Owen take to discover the identity of John's father? How is his identity finally revealed to John? What is John's reaction?
9. Briefly discuss Hester's relationship with Owen. In what ways does it differ from her relationship with John?
10. In what sense is it ironic that Reverend Merrill regains his faith when he sees the dress-maker's dummy?
9. Discuss the significance of the armlessness and amputation motif throughout the novel.
12. Owen has an apparent disgust or dislike for the Catholic Church. Discuss his reasons for this attitude and whether or not you think he overcomes his aversion to the Catholic Church by the end of the story.
13. What evidence is there in the story that Dan Needham is a good father?

14. Cite incidents from the story which seem to support Owen's belief in fate. At one point in the story, he lectures John on his friend's lack of willingness to take responsibility for his own life. Do you think Owen's concept of free will conflicts with his belief that God shapes all of our lives?
15. How do each of the following characters define faith: Reverend Merrill, John as the adult narrator, Reverend Dudley Wiggin, and Owen?
16. Discuss the extent to which baseball, John F. Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe, Vietnam, and television are symbols for the decaying morality in America.
17. Cite incidents from the story to illustrate the extent to which this is a coming-of-age story for John.
18. Describe the scene in the novel which strikes you as the most humorous.
19. Critics believe this novel discusses the relationship between sexuality and morality. Which incidents in the story support the following general statements about sexuality?
 - The sex drive is powerful enough to overcome morality.
 - Sexuality can be destroyed by events in one's life.
 - Interest in one's sexuality is a normal part of growing up.
20. Cite incidents from the story to support the following themes:
 - A man can fully and faithfully believe in God without "proof" of His existence here on earth.
 - Injustice is part of God's will.
 - Doubt is normal and appropriate for any person's belief in God.
21. As you think back on the entire book, what evidence is there that Owen really is "God's instrument"?
22. In what sense are Lydia and Grandmother doubles? How is John as an adult similar to his Grandmother?
23. Discuss the color red, the quarry, the closet, and dandelions as symbols in this story.
24. In what way are John's tirades against American politics and American politicians an example of irony?
25. What are Owen's opinions concerning the Vietnam War?

26. Discuss the following incidents in terms of irony:
- Frank Sinatra, whose songs Tabitha used to sing, was known as “The Voice.”
 - Owen’s vision/dream occurs, but is slightly flawed.
 - “The Shot” Owen and John practice saves the children.
27. Define and find examples in the text of the following literary terms:
- Foreshadowing
 - Symbol
 - Hyperbole
 - Paradox
 - Allusion
28. How is the concept of free will dealt with in *A Prayer for Owen Meany*?

A Prayer for Owen Meany

Notes

A Prayer For Owen Meany can be compared to the novels written by Charles Dickens. The memorable characters are well developed, the stories are interesting, and the themes are complex. It is a fictional memoir chronicling how John Wheelwright comes to believe in God because of his friendship with Owen Meany. John Irving, the author, wrote, “I’ve always asked myself what would be the magnitude of the miracle that could convince me of religious faith.” It is Owen Meany who can do that. The novel also explores the political atmosphere in America during, before and after, the Vietnam War. Irving stated, “I wanted in this novel to create two victims of the Vietnam period in our history,” referring to the novel’s two main characters, Owen Meany and John Wheelwright.

Because of the length and difficulty of this book, it is recommended for advanced eleventh and twelfth grade students. The novel does contain frequent instances of strong profanity, numerous adult themes, and the questioning of religious practices and beliefs. In addition, pre-teenage and adolescent sexuality, fantasy, and discovery sometimes play an important role in *A Prayer for Owen Meany*.

All references come from the Ballantine Books edition of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, copyright 1989.

A Prayer for Owen Meany

Terms and Definitions

Memoir - an account of one portion of a person's life, as told by that person; similar to an autobiography, but covering a smaller time period. Example: Nixon's *Six Crises*.

Coming of Age – a novel in which the main character or characters grow, mature, or understand the world in adult terms. Example: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Symbol - an object, person, or place that has a meaning in itself and that also stands for something larger than itself, usually an idea or concept; some concrete thing which represents an abstraction. Example: The sea could be symbolic for “the unknown,” since the sea is something which is physical and can be seen by the reader, but has elements which cannot be understood, it can be used *symbolically* to stand for the abstraction of “mystery,” “obscurity,” or “the unknown.”

Characterization – the methods, incidents, speech, etc., an author uses to reveal the people in the book.

Epithets - an adjective or phrase which delineates a personality by the attributes possessed by the person or thing. Example: Achilles the invincible.

The Homeric epithet is a phrase, usually a compound adjective, which is used frequently to describe a thing or person. Examples:

- “the wine-dark sea”
- “rosy-fingered Dawn”

These epithets help the reader understand the characters' important characteristics.

Motif - a situation, incident, idea, or image that is found and repeated significantly in a novel. Example: In *Hamlet*, revenge is a frequently repeated idea.

Theme - the central or dominant idea behind the story; the most important aspect that emerges from how the book treats its subject. Sometimes theme is easy to see, but, at other times, it may be more difficult. Theme is usually expressed indirectly, as an element the reader must figure out. It is a universal statement about humanity, rather than a simple statement dealing with plot or characters in the story. Themes are generally hinted at through different devices: a phrase or quotation that introduces the novel, a recurring element in the book, or an observation made that is reinforced through plot, dialogue, or characters. It must be emphasized that not all works of literature have themes in them.

In a story about a man who is diagnosed with cancer and, through medicine and will-power, returns to his former occupation, the theme might be: “real courage is demonstrated through internal bravery and perseverance.” In a poem about a flower that grows, blooms, and dies, the theme might be: “youth fades and death comes to all.”

Irony - a subtle, sometimes humorous perception of inconsistency in which the significance of a statement or event is changed by its content. For example: the firehouse burned down.

- *Dramatic irony* - the audience knows more about a character's situation than the character does, foreseeing an outcome contrary from the character's expectations. The character's statements have one meaning for the character and a different meaning for the reader, who knows more than the character.
- *Structural irony* - a naïve hero whose view of the world differs from the author's and reader's. Structural irony flatters the reader's intelligence at the expense of the hero.
- *Verbal irony* - a discrepancy between what is said and what is really meant; sarcasm. Example: calling a stupid man smart.

Foreshadowing – the use of hints or clues in a story to suggest what action is to come. Foreshadowing is frequently used to create interest and build suspense.

Plot - the pattern of events in a novel. Is it believable or credible given its setting? Is it well-paced as opposed to slow moving?

Narrator – the one who tells the story. If the narrator is a character in the book, the term is first-person narration. (Example: *Moby Dick* is narrated by Ishmael, a crew member). If the narrator is not a character, the term is third-person narration. (Example: *Sense and Sensibility*).

Hyperbole - exaggeration for emphasis; overstatement. Example: I've told you a million times to...

Allusion - a reference to a person, place, poem, book, event, or movie outside of the story that the author expects the reader will recognize. Example: In *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom speaks of "Chamberlain's umbrella," a reference to the British Prime Minister.

Flashback - a scene that interrupts the ongoing action in a story to show an event that happened earlier.

Litotes – a conscious understatement that achieves the opposite effect of the statement itself. Example: I like money a little.

Paradox – a statement that is self-contradictory yet makes a point. Example: "Darkness at the break of noon."

A Prayer for Owen Meany

Study Guide Teacher's Copy

Chapter 1 – The Foul Ball

Vocabulary Words

ell – an extension to a house

heterodox – departing from or opposed to the usual beliefs or doctrines

imperious – overbearing, arrogant

lexicon – dictionary

martyr – a person who suffers or dies rather than give up faith or principles

matriarchal – ruled by a woman

morosely – ill-tempered, sullen

obdurate – unrepentant

sagamore – a Native American chief

sedition – rebellious

stoic – remaining indifferent to the external world and to passion or emotion

translucent – partially transparent

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

The narrator remembers Owen Meany because he is the reason the narrator believes in God. The narrator is living in Canada, but the story takes place in Gravesend, New Hampshire.

2. Briefly describe Owen Meany.

He is a very small boy, about ten years old, with a strange voice. His complexion is the color of a gravestone and his skin reflects light, so he appears to be translucent, especially his ears.

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

The other baseball players call Owen “pinch walker Meany” because, most of the time, the pitchers miss his small strike zone and end up walking him. Owen is too small to be a good hitter, but he is an excellent base runner. Owen loves baseball and baseball cards.

4. The narrator writes “Owen was no rat. As vividly as any number of the stories in the Bible, Owen Meany showed us what a martyr was.” (Pg. 6) In what sense is Owen Meany a martyr in his elementary and Sunday schools?

The Sunday school students enjoy lifting Owen over their heads and passing him around the room. Owen complains to the other children, but he does not complain to the teachers; he is not a tattletale. Instead, he is like a martyr, who stoically endures the treatment.

5. Why is Watahantowet’s totem that of an armless man? What do you think the lack of arms might represent in this story?

The totem is armless to represent how the “local sagamore,” (the Indian Chief) felt when he signed his land over to the town. Some say that the totem has a feather in his mouth, implying that it is frustrated because it cannot write without arms. Others say it is not a feather, but a tomahawk, implying that the totem is frustrated because it cannot fight without arms.

The lack of arms represents helplessness, powerlessness, and the actual ripping of the land away from its rightful inhabitants. In this last case, the Indians are helpless to prevent the white man from stealing their land and cheating to keep it. Irving writes, “As for the settlement of the disputed deed, you can be sure the Indians were not the beneficiaries of the resolution to that difference of opinion.” (Pgs. 8–9)

6. Why does Johnny Wheelwright feel angry toward his mother after her death?

He is angry with his mother because she dies before revealing his father’s name to him.

7. Johnny writes, “And although I didn’t believe him that day, that was the day Owen Meany began his lengthy contribution to my belief in God.” (Pg. 10) Johnny and Owen are throwing rocks and discussing the identity of Johnny’s father. In what way does Owen, in the course of this conversation, contribute to Johnny’s belief in God?

Owen tells Johnny that, even though his mother dies before she reveals his father’s identity, Owen is confident that God will identify the father for Johnny. Owen says, “YOUR DAD CAN HIDE FROM YOU,...BUT HE CAN’T HIDE FROM GOD.” (Pg. 10) After making this proclamation, Owen finally manages to throw a stone far enough to reach the water, which is a surprise because of Owen’s small size.

8. Briefly describe both Johnny's and Owen's families.

Johnny was born Johnny Wheelwright, part of an old, respected, important, wealthy family in Gravesend. His grandmother's family came over on the Mayflower. His grandfather was a minister of the English church, who was banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for his unorthodox religious opinions. Owen's family, on the other hand, owns the Meany Granite Quarry. It is not a good business because most of the good granite has been mined. The quarry is dusty and noisy and stands in contrast to "his own physical delicacy." (Pg. 13)

9. Why does Johnny's mother decide not to go to college? How does Johnny feel about his mother's singing lessons?

Johnny's mother wants to stay home to help care for her dying father. She decides to travel to Boston once a week to take singing lessons, and she tells Johnny that she met his father on the Boston & Main Railroad, but she tells Johnny nothing more about his father. Johnny resents the singing lessons because his mother spends all day and night in Boston so she can be there for an early morning lesson.

10. Who is Lydia? In what sense is she a literary double or a substitute for Johnny's grandmother?

Lydia is a maid who works for Johnny's grandmother until Lydia develops cancer in her leg. After the leg is amputated, Lydia gets her own room; she does not need to work anymore. Rather than being the servant, she is now the one who is served. Lydia is a double for Johnny's grandmother because she is about the same age as Johnny's grandmother, she has tea with his grandmother, she plays cards with the bridge club, delivery boys and guests mistake her for Johnny's grandmother, and she learns to speak with the same "indignation of tone" that Johnny's grandmother uses. (Pg. 18)

11. Some critics believe that Owen is a Christ-like character. In what sense might the incident when Owen tricks his friends who are swimming at the quarry support this idea?

Answers will vary. Example: Owen is furious with the boys because they do not try to rescue him from the water quickly enough. He says: "YOU LET ME DROWN!... YOU DIDN'T DO ANYTHING! YOU JUST WATCHED ME DROWN! I'M ALREADY DEAD!... REMEMBER THAT: YOU LET ME DIE." (Pg. 21) When Christ was crucified, many of his followers watched his death but did nothing to rescue him. They knew that anyone who tried to help would also be crucified. The boys at the quarry are afraid of the deep, black water, and they are afraid of trying to rescue Owen because they might drown also. Since the boys assume Owen has died, his reappearance could be said to mirror Christ's resurrection.

12. Why is the Reverend Lewis Merrill of the Congregational Church upset when Johnny and his mother decide to attend the Episcopal Church after she marries Dan?

Reverend Merrill has known Johnny's mother since she was a young girl. He supported her when she insisted on keeping the identity of Johnny's father a secret. In addition, he baptized Johnny and did not want to lose his mother's beautiful voice in the choir.

13. Why does Owen's family move from the Catholic Church to the Episcopal Church? How does Owen feel about the Catholic Church services?

The Meany family switches churches because Mr. Meany has an irreparable quarrel with the Catholic Church. He describes it as an "UNSPEAKABLE OUTRAGE." The narrator believes this outrage must have something to do with Mrs. Meany because she never leaves her house, which he describes as "obdurate self-imprisonment that smacked of religious persecution...." (Pg. 28) Owen does not like the kneeling and the muttering of litanies. He thinks it interferes with his ability to pray or to talk directly to God.

14. Briefly describe Mrs. Meany. Why does Owen think it is not possible for him to attend the Gravesend Academy?

Mrs. Meany never leaves her house. The windows are closed even in the summer because of the quarry dust. She sits in the house and wears headphones to protect her ears from the noisy quarry machinery.

Owen does not have the money to attend the academy. Even when Johnny's mother tells him he can get a full scholarship, Owen does not think it will work. He knows that his father does not approve of his son's attending the academy because the people there are socially higher up than the Meanys.

15. Find a passage in this chapter that illustrates Owen's interest in helping humanity, which serves to reinforce the idea that he is a Christ-like figure.

Answers will vary. Example: "WE MISSED DOING A GOOD DEED.... THAT MAN SHINGLING THE CHURCH—HE NEEDED HELP." (Pg. 27)

16. How does Owen feel about Johnny's mother?

Owen thinks Johnny's mother has the best breasts of all the other mothers and thinks she smells better than the others, also.

17. For what reasons does Johnny think Owen keeps the baseball that has killed his mother? What might the baseball symbolize in this story?

Owen is a collector of odd things, especially about baseball, and that ball is the only time in his life Owen ever really came close to getting a hit.

Answers will vary. Example: Baseball is traditionally known as “America’s pastime.” It is a symbol that Irving uses for America’s political policies. When the baseball is an instrument of death, it is implied that American policies are destructive. Even things that are worthwhile and morally part of the soul of America can be evil and destroy what is beautiful and innocent.

18. Find an example of foreshadowing in this chapter.

Answers will vary. Example: The last paragraph hints to the reader that there is someone else at the game who might have kept the ball that killed Johnny’s mother.

Chapter 2 – The Armadillo

Vocabulary Words

adjudicate – to judge

animosity – strong dislike, hatred

assuage – to lessen

bastion – a fortified place

consecrated – made holy

diminutive – very small, tiny

euphemistically – substituting a word or phrase that is less distasteful or offensive

garish – too bright, gaudy, showy

immolation – to kill as a sacrifice

imperious – overbearing, arrogant

palaver – talk, idle chatter

potable – fit to drink

predestination – the doctrine that God foreordains everything that happens

rapaciousness – greediness, voraciousness

slatternly – carelessly, sloppily

suppliant – a person who is praying or asking humbly and earnestly

trepidation – fearful uncertainty, anxiety

trysts – secret meetings

wanton – sexually loose or open

1. In what ways is Johnny's mother "catlike"?

His mother's name is Tabitha, which when shortened, becomes "Tabby," a common name for a cat. She is a beautiful woman so people want to touch her, just as people often want to pet a cat. She sometimes enjoys being stroked, but, like a cat, she can also react to a touch with "chilling" indifference. She is primarily content and happy, and Johnny sometimes imagined that "anyone near enough to her could hear her purr." (Pg. 38)

2. In what ways is Dan Needham different from Tabitha's other beaux? What might his name represent in this story?

Dan is not good-looking. He is tall, with red hair and large eyeglasses, but he seems to understand six-year-old boys. Instead of talking to him as if he were a baby, Dan gives Johnny an important package to take care of.

"Needham" sounds like the phrase "Need Him." After his mother is killed, Johnny needs Dan.

3. How do Johnny and Owen feel about the armadillo?

Johnny and Owen love the armadillo. They love to play with it in the large attic closet. It is the first gift from one of Tabitha's male friends that Johnny keeps.

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

Noah, Simon, and Hester are all older than Johnny. They are active, athletic, and live a different kind of life than Johnny. Johnny looks forward to visiting them, but after a few days he is ready to return home to his peaceful, private life.

Noah and Simon force Hester and Johnny to kiss. Johnny, therefore, associates her with his first sexual feelings.

Irving writes that Johnny "swallowed half the lake every summer," which is hyperbolic. (Pg. 54)

5. Johnny writes:

Privately, I continue to be more forgiving of Hester than her own family is. I think she was up against a stacked deck from the start, and that everything she would become began for her when Noah and Simon made me kiss her—because they made it clear that kissing Hester was punishment, the *penalty* part of the game; to have to kiss Hester meant you had lost. (Pg. 57)

What does this passage foretell about Hester's future life? If you have read Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, discuss the ways Hester in *A Prayer For Owen Meany* is similar to the Hester in that novel and how the allusion to Hawthorne's heroine helps you understand this Hester.

Answers will vary. Example: Although it is impossible to tell at this point in the novel, the allusion to Hester Prynne leads the reader to certain conclusions: Irving's Hester is going to be sexually promiscuous, but she will suffer the consequences of her behavior. She, additionally, is learning the power of her sexuality at an early age. As a child, she loses every game to her older, stronger brothers, and as a woman, she will use sex to dominate and control the men in her life.

Irving's Hester will probably be accused of engaging in wanton sex and violating the morality of the times.

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

Johnny is worried that Noah, Simon, and Hester will play too rough with Owen. Owen is a very small boy, and the armadillo is described as being a "diminutive beast." (Pg. 64) Johnny is worried that his cousins will hurt Owen with their rough play, and Owen is worried they will harm the armadillo.

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

Owen is standing with his hands clasped behind his back. The sunlight makes him look like his ears are on fire. She does not think he is human.

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

Answers may vary. Example: "There was no doubt that, in the dazzling configurations of the sun that poured through the attic skylight, he looked like a descending angel—a tiny but fiery god, sent to adjudicate the errors of our ways." (Pg. 69)

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

Hester wants to touch Owen. Many people like to touch Owen, so he is accustomed to it. However, when Hester touches him, he retreats from her in a nervous way. Another example is Owen's reaction to Hester's tickling. He becomes so nervous thinking she is going to grab his crotch that he wets himself.

10. What is the major reason Owen is upset about wetting his pants?

Owen wants to go with Johnny and his mother to Sawyer Depot. His family never goes anywhere, and Owen never gets to go anywhere. He does not care what the cousins do to him; he just wants the chance to travel out of Gravesend.

11. In what way does Owen think Johnny has misjudged his cousins?

Owen thinks their "wildness" is really a lack of direction. He tells Johnny, "SOMEONE HAS TO GIVE ANY GROUP OF PEOPLE DIRECTION, YOU KNOW." (Pg. 79)

12. Why does Owen give Johnny all of his baseball cards? What does Dan suggest Johnny do with the cards?

The baseball cards are Owen's favorite things. He wants to show Johnny that he is sorry about the accident and that Owen loved Tabitha. Owen gives Johnny the cards as his way of saying that he loves Johnny enough to trust him with the collection.

Dan suggests that Johnny should return the cards and give Owen something to show Johnny's love. Johnny decides to give Owen the armadillo.

13. How do Johnny's experiences with the armadillo help to shape his adult belief in the "special purpose" of events and things?

The armadillo is a gift from Dan. Johnny knows it is the best item to give to Owen but is worried about hurting Dan's feelings by giving away the gift. Dan tells Johnny that he would "be honored if anything I gave you could actually be used for something important—if it were to have any special purpose...." (Pg. 83) This is the first time Johnny understands the idea that anything can have a designated or special purpose. As an adult, Johnny observes all the holy days or "red-letter" days of the church.

14. One of the themes in this novel is the narrator's belief in predestination. Find a passage in this story which seems to support this theme.

Answers will vary.

Example: Johnny quotes an incident from the Bible when the Lord is talking to Jeremiah:

"Before I formed you in the womb

I knew you,

and before you were born

I consecrated you;

I appointed you a prophet to the

nations." (Pg. 83)

15. What message is Owen giving to Johnny when he returns the armadillo without its claws?

Owen is saying that both he and Johnny are "maimed and mutilated by what had happened to us." (Pg. 85) He is telling Johnny that he would cut off his hands for Johnny if he could. He feels terrible that his hands held and swung the bat. There is no way to sit the clawless armadillo on the table without the animal tipping over. Owen is saying that Tabitha's death is unacceptable, but it is something everyone must live with.

16. In what sense is Owen a "Chosen One"?

Owen believes that it is God's will that Tabitha dies. God works through Owen and uses Owen's hands as His instrument.

17. Why do you suppose all of Owen's words are written in capital letters?

Answers will vary. Example: Any pronouns that refer to God, such as He and Him are always capitalized. Capitalizing Owen's words serves to connect him to God and to emphasize the importance of his statements. In addition, Irving refers to the "hypnotic awfulness of Owen's voice." Putting the words Owen speaks in capital letters emphasizes that the reader should remember that Owen has a "rare" voice. (Pgs. 71, 69)

18. Find two statements in this chapter which are anti-American.

Answers will vary. Examples: "I avoid American newspapers and magazines, and American television – and other Americans in Toronto. But Toronto is not far enough away" and "I believe that President Reagan can say these things only because he knows that the American people will never hold him accountable for what he says; it is history that holds you accountable, and I've already expressed my opinion that Americans are not big on history." (Pg. 89)

19. Irving often uses the literary technique of foreshadowing so readers know something is hinted at, and the suspense will keep them interested enough in the story to continue reading. What sentence at the end of this chapter is foreshadowing?

“It was Owen Meany who kept me out of Vietnam—a trick that only Owen could have managed.” (Pg. 93)

20. What does Owen think about the Vietnam War?

There is no good way to end the Vietnam War. It is not a war that the United States can win.

21. Since the book begins with Johnny’s mother’s death in Chapter One, and in this section Tabitha is alive, what literary term is the author using?

He is using flashbacks to tell much of the rest of the story.

Chapter 3 – The Angel

Vocabulary Words

amulet – an object worn on the body because it is believed to have the power to protect against injury or evil (see talisman)

firmament – the heavens

literally – actually, in fact

provincialism – narrowness of outlook

sepulchral – of the grave or burial; dismal; gloomy

stoical – showing indifference to joy, grief, pleasure, or pain; unflinching under suffering

talisman – anything thought to have magic powers; a charm to keep away evil (see amulet)

torpor – a state of being dormant or inactive

virulent – extremely poisonous or injurious

1. The dress dummy is important to Tabitha: “There was not a night when my mother lay in her bed unable to see the comforting figure of the dressmaker’s dummy; it was not only her confederate against the darkness, it was her double.” (Pg. 95) What might the dressmaker’s dummy symbolize in this story? In what sense is it a double for Tabitha?

Answers will vary. Example: Tabitha is described as being beautiful with large, perfect breasts. She is the ideal mother. The dressmaker’s dummy duplicates her wonderful figure so well that in poor light, it could be mistaken for Tabitha. Whenever any of the characters see the dummy, his or her memories of Tabitha surface. In this sense, the dressmaker’s dummy symbolizes memories of Tabitha.

2. Why does Owen decide to remain “bravely” in Tabitha’s room after he sees the angel?

Owen is staying in her room to protect Tabitha. He does not know what kind of angel he saw. It could have been a good angel, or it could have been the Angel of Death.

3. For what reasons does Owen believe that there are no accidents in life? How does his belief in predestination and patterns relate to Tabitha’s death?

Owen believes there is a reason for everything. He thinks there is a reason he is small and has a funny voice. In his opinion, all events are the results of God’s plan. Owen believes that when he goes into Tabitha’s room he disturbs the angel at work. Because of this, the Angel of Death reassigns the task to Owen. In his mind, disturbing death caused him to become the one to hit the “fated” baseball. Tabitha’s death could not have been prevented since it had been predestined.

4. Owen is “exact” in what he says. He means things literally. Knowing this, what is the significance of his observation that when Grandmother sees Owen in Tabitha’s room she begins “WAILING LIKE A BANSHEE.” (Pg. 105) What other elements point toward Tabitha’s death?

A banshee is a female spirit whose scream is the sign that someone in the family is going to die. All these hints (banshee, Angel of Death, Tabitha’s hatred of the darkness, the dummy counting her breaths and wearing the red dress, Dan treating Johnny’s mother horribly in the play, the wedding present from Owen that resembles a tombstone, the hardness of the hail) predict the death and that Owen seems to know Tabitha is going to die soon.

5. Briefly describe Reverend Lewis Merrill and Reverend Dudley Wiggin. What is Owen’s opinion of each man? How does Johnny feel about them?

Reverend Lewis Merrill is an educated man, who attended Princeton and is the pastor of the Congregationalist Church. Johnny likes him because he is “full of doubt” and is able to understand the doubts of his parishioners. Johnny thinks Merrill makes religion seem reasonable because he defines faith as believing in God without any real evidence and thinks that doubt is part of faith.

Reverend Dudley Wiggin was an airline pilot before becoming the rector of the Episcopal Church. He speaks with great fervor and zeal, but he is not so eloquent as Reverend Merrill is. Wiggin views faith as a battle against adversaries, and his sermons are dull and lacking refinement. Owen prefers Reverend Wiggin to Reverend Merrill because he thinks that belief is not something to be learned or studied, and Reverend Merrill has too much doubt to be a pastor.

6. In what sense does John take a “particularly Yankee view” of Reverend Merrill and Reverend Wiggin? What viewpoints does John assign to the “Yankees”?

He thinks that things are as they appear. Merrill and the Congregational Church appear to be the model of purity, whereas Wiggin and the Episcopal Church appear to be gloomy. Johnny feels pity for Merrill because of his family. He seems to be a plain man, who has, through his power of speech, risen to be a pastor.

John thinks that Wiggin is a crass but athletic man. His family is annoyingly healthy and strong. John describes his children as “huge, oafish athletes, irritatingly ‘well rounded.’” (Pg. 115)

In John’s opinion, Yankees judge a person mostly by appearances. Note that the word “Yankees,” besides referring to people living in New England, also alludes to baseball.

7. Find a passage in this story where the narrator makes an ironic comment about democracy and explain the irony.

“My Aunt Martha—like many Americans—could become quite tyrannical in the defense of democracy.” (Pg. 119) Democracy involves the elimination of tyranny, in the first place. Furthermore, the democratic process Martha is forcefully defending is only the order for bathroom use.

8. In what sense does the Vietnam War destroy both Harry Holt and Buzzy Thurston? Find an instance of litotes on page 127.

Harry Holt joins the Navy and is killed by a poisonous snake in Vietnam, while waiting in line for a visit to a whorehouse. Buzzy Thurston tries to avoid the war by poisoning his body with liquor and drugs before his physical. He becomes addicted to the drugs and alcohol, and continues to take them, even after he is declared unfit to serve. While intoxicated, he is killed in an automobile accident.

Irving writes about Hoyt that “he would cause his mother no little grief.” The understated nature of the comment, especially in light of Mrs. Holt’s difficulties after her son dies in Vietnam, reinforces the idea of litotes.

9. What is Mrs. Holt’s opinion of people who criticize the President of the United States or the Vietnam War?

She thinks it is not anti-American or unpatriotic to criticize a President or an American policy.

10. Why do many of the mourners at Tabitha's funeral cover their ears?

They hear the sounds of children playing baseball, and they cover their ears because they cannot stand to listen to the crack of the bat.

11. Why do both Owen and Johnny go to Tabitha's grave? Owen is there first and hears Johnny and Hester calling his name. Why does he shout, "I HEAR YOU!...WHAT DO YOU WANT? WHAT ARE YOU DOING? WHAT DO YOU WANT OF ME?" (Pg. 139)

They are both going to the grave because they are worried about Tabitha. They know that she did not like the dark when she was alive.

Owen probably thinks the Angel of Death or God is at the grave. Owen's question asking what the intruders want from him most likely means, "what more does God want" from him, since he has already performed God's will by substituting for the Angel of Death and killing Tabitha.

12. For what reasons does Owen want to go to Dan's place to get the dummy?

Owen does not think that Dan should be alone with the dummy because it is the image of Tabitha. He also thinks Johnny and his grandmother should not have the dummy because it is too much like Tabitha.

13. Find a passage in this chapter that foreshadows a future use for the dummy.

"Later, I thought that Owen must have known that dummy was important; he must have foreseen that even that unwanted dress would have a use—that it had a purpose." (Pg. 142)

14. What might the color red represent or symbolize in this story? Hints: Tabitha never wears the red dress. The red dress is on the dummy when Owen takes it from Dan's home. Dan has red hair. As an adult, Johnny observes holy days, or "red-letter" days. When Owen first meets Johnny's cousins, his face is red from riding his bicycle.

Answers will vary. Example: Red represents something or someone that is special or has a special purpose in life. It may be a reference to fate or predestination. Another interpretation is that red is associated with sexuality. The color red illustrates one of the book's themes that one's sexuality and spirituality are linked and that sexuality is strong enough to overcome morality.

Chapter 4 – The Little Lord Jesus

Vocabulary Words

dirgeful – sad music; like a funeral hymn

curmudgeon – ill-mannered, bad-tempered person

fastidious – very refined; exceptionally clean

literal – based on the actual words; not figurative or symbolic

orthodoxy – sticking to established doctrines

procrastinate – to put off doing something until a future time

appellation – a name or title

tremulous – trembling or quivering

facetiousness – humor

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

Johnny divides his time between his grandmother's home on 80 Front Street and Dan's apartment. The narrator thinks that Christmas is especially difficult for families who have lost someone: It is a time when they are "aware of what we lack, of who's not home." (Pg. 147)

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

Owen does not want to be the Announcing Angel. He does not like being stuck in the flying apparatus throughout the entire play. Owen thinks that the boy who plays Joseph needs to be someone who does not smirk. He also thinks that Mary does not necessarily need to be beautiful. Owen does not like the turtledove costumes because they are unrecognizable. Further, he does not like the rule that the baby Jesus must not cry. The infant representing Jesus is swapped for a different baby every time it shows any signs of fussing.

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

A happy boarder is one who has family pictures in his room and has pictures of real girlfriends. Dormitories are evil because they are places where homesick boys live. Owen and Johnny are searching for clues to their futures. They both expect to attend Gravesend Academy one day.

4. One of the motifs in this story is Owen's dislike of Catholics. Find a passage in this story to support this idea.

Answers will vary. Example: "NEVER MIND," Owen said. "I'VE NOTHING MORE TO DO WITH THE CATHOLICS." (Pg. 158)

5. Critics believe that one of the overall themes for this novel is that sexuality is powerful enough to overcome morality. They also believe that this is a coming of age story. Cite an incident from this chapter which seems to illustrate both of these ideas.

Answer may vary. Example: Johnny and Owen find some condoms in the dormitory rooms, which Catholics do permit as a means of birth control. Johnny and Owen, though, practice putting on the condoms. This incident illustrates that they are both becoming sexually aware, and Owen is rebelling against the doctrines of the Catholic Church by learning to use a condom.

6. What is the “doubt” referred to in the passage below? Why is it significant that Owen casts himself in the role of baby Jesus?

And Owen, who had built a huge nest for himself—in a mountain of hay—appeared to radiate the truly untouchable quality of a deity to be reckoned with, of a prophet who had no doubt. (Pg. 168)

Owen has no doubt of God’s existence, which fits in with his liking Reverend Wiggin, who also has no doubts. In this story, Owen is a symbol for the connection between man’s earthly and spiritual existence. He “radiate[s] the truly untouchable quality of a deity,” but he is sexually aroused by Hester and, probably, Tabitha. (Pg. 168)

7. John the Evangelist was the author of the Fourth Gospel. His function is that of a witness and a recorder of Jesus’ life and words. What evidence is there in this chapter that Owen has cast Johnny in the same role?

Owen selects Johnny to play Joseph in the Christmas pageant. Johnny describes the role by saying, “I did nothing. I was just the witness.” (Pg. 173) It is especially significant because Owen portrays Christ. Johnny is an observer and recorder of what happens to Owen, just as John saw and recorded what happened to Jesus.

8. What indications are there in this chapter that Owen, despite his diminutive size and young age, is a leader who takes charge of a situation?

Owen takes over the Christmas Pageant. He also orchestrates the funeral for the dog named Sagamore, including saying the prayer when Reverend Merrill seems to be confused.

9. What is striking about the Meany family crèche? One of the motifs in this novel is that of armlessness or amputation. Find an example of this motif in this story.

The Nativity scene is composed of “cheaply painted wooden figures.” (Pg. 182) The figure of the baby Jesus is missing from the display. Joseph is described as missing one hand, and his expression is one of smoldering rage; the cow is missing a leg; Mary looks blind; the scene is portrayed as nearly anti-religious.

10. How does Owen feel about coincidences, such as the fact that Johnny and Owen are under the bridge just as *The Flying Yankee* roars across?

Owen does not believe in coincidences. He believes that God shapes everyone's life and that each person's fate is as unstoppable as the train.

11. What, according to Owen, is the reason for his unusual voice? How does Germaine feel about Owen's voice?

Owen believes that his voice comes from God, and that God has a special purpose for his unusual voice. Germaine, however, is frightened of Owen. She thinks his voice comes from the Devil.

12. Why are the address and phone number of Tabitha's music teacher important to Grandmother?

It is possible the singing teacher may have some information concerning the identity of Johnny's father.

13. In what way is the incident with the Brinker-Smiths not a coincidence? How does it help to place Owen in the right place at the right time?

Owen and Johnny decide to abandon their explorations of the dormitory rooms after being trapped in the same room with the Brinker-Smiths when the couple makes love, so the boys return to 80 Front Street to play. Because they have returned to the home of Johnny's grandmother, Owen is present when Mr. Morrison announces his resignation from the role of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come.

14. Owen tries to convince Mr. Morrison that the role of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come is a great part. He says, "THERE'S NOTHING AS SCARY AS THE FUTURE." Grandmother agrees with Owen. She knows that "nothing is as scary as the future...unless it's someone who *knows* the future." (Pg. 195) What future does Grandmother "know" about?

Grandmother thinks she will grow senile and that her family will need to place her in a retirement home.

15. An epithet is an adjective or phrase which delineates one's personality by pointing out the attributes possessed by that person. For example, in this story, Owen is sometimes referred to as "The Granite Mouse." Find another epithet which is used to describe and refer to Owen. Explain what attribute "The Granite Mouse" might be hinting at.

Owen is also called "The Prince of Peace."

Answers may vary. Example: Besides referring to Owen's small size, the term also means that, despite his height, Owen is strong, tough, and almost unbreakable.

16. What do Owen's two parts, that of the Christ child and that of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, have in common?

They both need an actor with stage presence, who can take command of the stage without words.

Chapter 5 – The Ghost of the Future

Vocabulary Words

acquiescent – consenting

deleterious – harmful

eclectic – various and different

genuflect – to bend the knee, as in reverence or worship

lascivious – lustful

lugubrious – very sad and gloomy

morose – gloomy

nave – the part of a church that is between the side aisles

penultimate – next to last

perfunctory – without care or concern, indifferent

petulant – impatient or irritable

proliferation – spreading

provocative – tending to provoke to action

quintessential – most nearly perfect manifestation

sanguinary – bloody

tripartite – divided into three parts

vociferously – vehemently; loudly

1. Why does Dan think it might be a good thing if Owen has a cold when he plays the role of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come?

Owen is so terrifying in this role that the frightened children in the audience cry. Dan thinks it might be better if Owen, as the Ghost, could show some sign of being human.

2. Why do you think Owen does not want to invite his parents to see the play?

Answers will vary. Example: Owen is a teenager who is worried his parents might embarrass him. Another possibility is that he thinks they are so uninterested in him that they would refuse the invitation. It has been established that they have experienced some kind of falling out with the Catholic Church. Perhaps Owen thinks a religious play might hurt or offend them, especially since Owen is playing the part of Christ.

3. Why is Owen cranky as Mrs. Wiggin tries to wrap him in his swaddling clothes?

Owen is sick with a fever; he is also upset because Grandmother decides not to attend the performance. Barb Wiggin treats him in a manner which Owen feels is sexual.

4. Find an incident in this chapter that supports the idea that Owen symbolizes the connection between mankind and God.

Answers will vary. Example: Barb Wiggin kisses Owen when he is wrapped up as the Christ child. Additionally, Mary Beth Baird wants to touch and carry Owen. He is the center of attention, and everyone stares at him. Owen also orders everyone around in rehearsals.

5. In what way is Owen's question, "WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING HERE?" misinterpreted by the audience? (Pg. 219)

The audience does not know that Owen is talking to his parents, who have surprised him by attending the performance. They think that he is asking the audience a metaphysical question concerning existence.

6. Why is it ironic that the adult John has strong, disturbing opinions about Reagan? Does this switch from a young narrator to a mature one confuse you? Why do you think Irving changed times?

Canon Mackie tells John that it is very American to have strong, disturbing opinions, and Canadians distrust strong opinions. John obsesses about American politics, yet he knows very little about Canada. He chooses to live in Canada but does not bother to learn his way around.

Answers may vary: Irving is trying to tell Owen's story from various perspectives switching from present to past to future to distant or recent past, which allows the author to keep the reader off-guard, just as the citizens of Gravesend are frequently confused by Owen. In addition, the time changes remind the reader of the three ghosts in A Christmas Carol.

7. Why is John upset when Reagan authorizes a test of nuclear weapons?

John thinks the test of these weapons is provocative and will pressure other countries, specifically the Soviet Union, into conducting similar tests.

8. Canon Mackie says John lives in the past. What evidence is there in this chapter that he may be correct in his assessment of John?

Answers will vary. Example: John is devoted to the memory of Canon Campbell, and since the Christmas of '53, John has had no interest in Christmas. In actuality, John's past was so traumatic that his need should be to escape, rather than remain trapped in it.

9. In what ways has the Christmas that occurred in 1953 changed the story of Christ in John's mind?

Owen, as the Christ child, demands to be worshiped. He banishes his mother and his father from the theater (church). John describes Jesus as a "born victim, born raw, born bandaged, born angry and accusing...." Previously, at least Johnny could "enjoy the fantasy," but now he cannot. (Pg. 226)

10. In what sense does the audience at the performance of Dan's play disturb Johnny?

He imagines that the people in the audience are the same people who were in the bleachers watching the baseball game when his mother was killed. He thinks that if he searches the audience, he might be able to determine which person his mother was waving to just as the "fated" ball hit her. Johnny comes to the conclusion that she must have been waving at his father.

11. What frightens Owen during the Dickens play? How does Johnny try to explain Owen's vision?

Owen believes he sees his name on the gravestone. Johnny points out that before the play Owen wrote his name in capital letters in the powder on his makeup table. He is implying that Owen mentally transfers the words from the makeup table to the tombstone in the play because of the high fever.

12. What connection do Grandmother and Germaine make between Lydia's death and Owen's vision?

They believe that Owen has special powers and that he has foreseen Lydia's death through his vision.

13. Cite an incident in this chapter that illustrates that Johnny is becoming sexually aware. In what sense does Johnny think his lust is evidence that his father is becoming a larger part of him?

Johnny is attracted to Germaine, who is sleeping in his room because she is too upset over Lydia's death to be alone.

Johnny does not understand his sexuality. When he feels lust, he also feels guilty, as if his developing sexual awareness is somehow wrong. He thinks this feeling of lust must have come from his father and that his "father might be evil." (Pg. 252)

14. How does Owen convince Johnny that he truly saw his name on the tombstone? What information from the vision does Owen withhold from Johnny? What is Johnny's reaction?

Owen tells Johnny that the tombstone in his vision had "THE WHOLE THING." (Pg. 254) The name on the stone is Owen's full name, Paul O. Meany, Jr. Johnny asks Owen whether the date of death was also inscribed on the stone, but Owen hesitates before replying negatively. It is the hesitation, however, that reveals to Johnny that a date really had appeared. Johnny begins to cry, not because he now believes in Owen's vision, "but because it was the first time he had lied to me." (Pg. 255)

15. How does the last paragraph contribute to the overall theme of predestination?

Johnny wants to ask Scrooge's question: Will these things occur or are they simply possibilities? Once again, the reader is confronted with opposing viewpoints about fate, faith, and the future.

Chapter 6 – The Voice

Vocabulary Words

acolytes – assistants; followers

allotment – a portion; a share

androgynous – both male and female in one

ardor – emotional warmth, passion

atheist – one who believes there is no God

banality – dullness

conjecturally – theoretically

coxswain – the person who steers a racing shell and calls out the rowing rhythm for the crew

dyslexia – impairment of the ability to read

gout – acute arthritis with swelling of the feet and hands

haranguing – blustering; harassing

macadam – material used in road making

multifarious – having many kinds or elements

narthex – an enclosed passage in a church

palimony – property settlement claimed by one member of an unmarried couple who separate after having lived together

pestilential – like a plague

portentous – ominous

precocity – ahead of the usual development

prurient – expressing lustful ideas or desires

puerile – childish, immature

rancorousness – bitter hatefulness

sepulchre – a tomb

sinewy – tough, strong

whippet – a slender, swift dog

1. Why does Grandmother decide to get a television? In what sense does owning a television seem to add years to her life?

Grandmother buys a television because there is no one left in the household to share her books after Tabitha's and Lydia's deaths. She also has seen a television in a nursing home. Even though she thinks it drains the remaining life out of the patients in the home, she is hooked by the images she sees on the television sets.

Grandmother becomes a "slave" to her television; however, she also is contemptuous of what she sees on the set. She uses her energy to complain and express her outrage. Her anger over what is in television programs keeps her active and alert, thus lengthening her life.

2. Why does Owen admire Liberace? In Dan's opinion, why does Owen admire Liberace? Does Liberace's death from AIDS affect Owen and Grandmother?

Owen thinks that Liberace is a good man. The celebrity is devoted to his mother, takes care of his brother, and, in Owen's opinion, would never hurt anyone.

Dan thinks that Owen is "smart," but not very "worldly." He thinks Owen likes Liberace because the pianist could never "exist" in Gravesend. Owen has never been anywhere else. (Pg. 263)

Both Owen and Grandmother remain unconcerned by Liberace's homosexuality and death. They still admire him.

3. For what reason does Hester go "ON THE WARPATH" after Noah and Simon are sent to Gravesend Academy? (Pg. 265)

Noah and Simon are being sent to Gravesend Academy by their parents to help save them from their wild ways, but the academy does not accept girls. Hester is not upset because she cannot attend the school; she is upset because her parents have no special plans "for her salvation." (Pg. 265)

4. Cite an incident from the chapter that illustrates the depth of Owen's feelings of friendship for John.

Answers will vary. Example: Owen decides to go to the ninth grade at Gravesend High School instead of entering the academy. John is a terrible student, and Gravesend Academy refuses to admit him until he completes ninth grade at the high school. Owen is academically gifted, but he decides to wait for John so they can attend the school together.

5. In the Bible, Mary Magdalene is a reformed prostitute, who faithfully follows Jesus after he forgives her for her sins. She is the first person to discover that his body is not in the tomb after his crucifixion. How does Owen feel about the statue of Mary Magdalene?

Owen does not like Catholics because he thinks they worship objects, and he feels this adoration is ridiculous. He particularly dislikes the statue of Mary Magdalene because it is “stupidly” placed under a cement archway that is going nowhere. The nuns who live nearby chase away any children who throw rocks or in any way attempt to deface the statue. The narrator says the statue is whitewashed every spring and despite the “occasional stains of human desecration—Mary Magdalene attracted more light than any other object” at the Catholic School. (Pg. 270) This could refer to Tabitha having had an illegitimate child but still being revered by everyone in Gravesend. Owen also does not like nuns because he thinks they are “UNNATURAL” and refers to them as “PENGUINS.” (Pg. 272)

6. How does Owen define a miracle?

A miracle cannot be proved, but it must be believed, another reference to faith.

7. What sentences in this chapter indicate or hint at the possibility that Owen might be ill?

Answers may vary. Example: Owen says, “YOU KNOW THE PART ABOUT THE DIMMING VISION? WELL, SOMETIMES MY VISION DIMS—JUST LIKE BETTE DAVIS’S!” (Pg. 274)

8. Why does Owen think that Johnny may be disappointed if he discovers the identity of his father?

Owen thinks Tabitha was a good mother; therefore, if she had felt that Johnny’s father would have been good for her son, she would have revealed the identity of the man to Johnny.

9. What is Owen’s advice to Johnny about Hester?

Owen tells Johnny that Hester would do “ANYTHING” to anger her parents, even marry Johnny, so it is fortunate that she is a cousin. However, Hester would not marry Johnny because she actually loved him, but because it would “DRIVE HER PARENTS NUTS.” (Pgs. 276–277)

10. Find a passage in this chapter that suggests to the reader that John, as an adult, thinks of Owen in the same way he (John) might think of Jesus.

“Alleluia,” I said. I was thinking of Owen when I added, “He is risen.” (Pg. 282)

11. List three reasons John thinks women are attracted to Owen.

Owen looks like someone who has “earned what grasp of the world he had.” He appears to be “in command,” and the girls feel compelled to “touch him,” just as girls did when he was younger. (Pg. 285)

12. What qualities does Owen possess which help him be accepted and even become a leader at the Gravesend Academy?

The bigger boys do not intimidate Owen because he is accustomed to being physically smaller. He gets along with the older boys because he is smarter. He quickly adopts a cynical attitude and becomes adept at sarcasm, both of which are admired at Gravesend Academy.

13. Identify more epithets associated with Owen besides “The Granite Mouse” and “The Prince of Peace.” Why do you suppose there are no epithets for John?

Owen becomes known as “Sarcasm Master,” “The Voice,” “black-coffee Meany,” “pack-a-day Meany,” “Ladies’ Man Meany,” “Older-Woman Master,” “Slam-Dunk Meany,” and “Slam-Dunk Master.” (Pgs 288–299)

Answers will vary. Example: John does not excel in anything and does not stand out in any way. John does not have Owen’s presence.

14. Why does Owen want his essays published only in capital letters? How do the faculty at the school feel about “The Voice”?

By writing in all capital letters, Owen hopes to grab the reader’s attention quickly. Some of the faculty like Owen’s writing, including Dan, Mr. Early, and the headmaster. However, there are many others who are his enemies and refer to Owen in the faculty meetings as “that little turd.” (Pg. 301)

15. Which sports does Owen enjoy? What is his “absurd goal” when he plays basketball? (Pg. 303) What steps does he take to reach this goal?

Owen enjoys playing soccer and basketball. Even though he is very short, Owen wants to leap high enough to be able to stuff the ball into the basket. Owen makes John practice lifting him up above the basket’s rim so he can stuff the ball. This feat requires perfect timing and needs to be practiced, and it is also reminiscent of Owen’s childhood dislike of being lifted above the students’ heads.

16. Why does John go to see the school psychiatrist? How does Owen help John overcome his learning problems?

Owen frequently does John's homework; therefore, it is superior to his classwork. Because of this inconsistency, John is sent to talk to the school psychiatrist, but Owen thinks John has a learning disability. He says that John is smart but works too slowly because of this disability. Owen discovers that John's eyes wander from side to side when reading and solves the problem by having John read through a window cut into a piece of paper. John can see only two or three lines through the window and is able to read more quickly this way.

17. What evidence is there that the adult John constantly thinks about Owen? Why does he sarcastically write, "Oh, what a nation of moralists the Americans are!"? (Pg. 306)

Answers will vary. Example: One of the girls in John's class asks if he will conduct class outside. He answers dully, "No," and then writes that he knows what The Voice would have said: "ONLY IF IT RAINS," referring to the rain keeping the dust in the quarry from flying around. (Pg. 308)

John thinks the American sense of morality is misplaced. Americans were outraged by Gary Hart's extramarital activities but tolerate Reagan's "immoral" policies concerning the Contras in Nicaragua. In John's opinion, Reagan's policies violate the law and are morally corrupt, yet, the American people reserve their moral outrage for Hart.

18. Why do you think Owen wants Reverend Merrill to be Mr. Scammon's replacement as the school minister?

Owen enjoys discussing religious issues with Reverend Merrill. These include the nature of faith and whether or not a believer needs "proof" of God's existence in the form of miracles.

19. Briefly describe Randolph White. What sentences indicate that Randolph White's selection as the new headmaster is a disaster for Owen and John? What literary term is used?

Randolph White dresses in neat gray suits with white shirts. Owen believes that he is both a racist and an anti-Semite, but he describes himself to Owen as being a "decision maker."

Answers will vary. Example: "That was the spring when the Search Committee found a new headmaster. That was the decade that would defeat us." (Pg. 315) The literary term is foreshadowing.

20. What do you think the dandelions in this story might represent?

The dandelions in this story may represent any individual who is different from the majority. Mrs. Brocklebank has removed the "murdered dandelions" from her lawn; other neighbors were "attacking" dandelions; Mrs. White wants dandelions "ripped out by their roots," and her husband says "they will be!" Dandelions are even called "pestilential weeds." (Pgs. 312, 315, 319) The small plants might also symbolize Owen Meany himself.

21. How does Owen break the law for the first time? Explain the irony of what he does.

Owen figures out how to make fake draft cards for other students, who can put any birth date they want on the card; then, they can buy alcohol. It is ironic that draft cards, which threaten students with death in Vietnam, are used by Owen as a way to also make students happy.

22. List three decisions Randolph White makes that Owen criticizes. Which of White's decisions has the potential to do the most harm to the students?

White builds a new home for his family. He moves the morning meeting to the stage of the Great Hall. White abolishes the Latin requirement and changes the dismissal policy. The change in the dismissal policy has the potential to do the most harm. If a boy is brought before the Executive Committee, there is no one on the Committee who really knows the boy and no one to speak in his defense. A teenager dismissed from school after the age of eighteen is eligible for military service, which would have been life-threatening.

23. How does Owen feel about John F. Kennedy?

Owen thinks that Kennedy, despite his being a Catholic, is a kind of savior. He is enthralled with Kennedy's speech, especially when the President says, "ASK NOT WHAT YOUR COUNTRY CAN DO FOR YOU—ASK WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR YOUR COUNTRY." (Pg. 336)

Chapter 7 – The Dream

Vocabulary Words

desultory – jumping from one subject to another

fatalistic – the belief that all events are determined by fate and are inevitable

laconically – briefly

pontificating – speaking in a pompous way

sociopath – an antisocial person

1. Why does Owen refer to John as "Mister Responsibility"?

Owen is being sarcastic. John does not take any responsibility for his own self-improvement. He applies only to the state university, whereas Owen applies to Harvard, Yale, and the state university.

2. In what ways did Owen prepare for the trip to Boston before he and Johnny left?

Owen has the label and a picture of Tabitha wearing the red dress. Before leaving Gravesend, Owen called Tabitha's old music teacher to confirm the address. After hearing Owen's unusual voice, the music teacher said he could have an appointment any time.

3. Why does Owen reject the remedies the music teacher thinks may help correct Owen's voice problems?

Owen believes that God has given him the unusual voice for a reason.

4. For what reasons did Tabitha become "The Lady in Red" once a week? Mr. McSwiney recalls that Tabitha usually sang Frank Sinatra songs, which bored him. What is Owen implying when he says, "I THINK WE CAN ASSUME THAT SOMEBODY LIKED TO LISTEN TO IT." (Pg. 357)

Tabitha sang in the Orange Grove club once a week and wore the red dress because she wanted to be "wholly out of character" when she sang. Owen is implying that the man who is John's father must have liked to listen to Tabitha sing Frank Sinatra songs. NOTE: It is significant that everyone in Grovesend thinks that Tabitha's voice was extraordinary and that she was beautiful and sensual. Her singing teacher feels, however, that she had only a fair voice, and the seller of the red dress, Mr. Giordana, says that Tabitha sang Sinatra's songs "real good, too." (Pg. 347) The fact that Tabitha lied about what happened in Boston is not revealed until later.

5. What three things does Owen know about his life?

*He knows that he is going to die.
He knows that his voice does not change.
He knows that he is God's instrument.*

6. Why does Owen become disillusioned with JFK? In what way does Owen think JFK's behavior is explained by the fact that he is a Catholic?

He learns that JFK has had an affair with Marilyn Monroe. Owen thinks that if Kennedy can rationalize adultery, he can rationalize other immoral behavior. Owen thinks Catholics believe that they can be free of their sins and forgive themselves just by going to confession. Owen feels the problem with JFK is that he cannot get a divorce because Catholicism prohibits it.

7. For what reasons does Owen think he is justified in "propositioning" Mrs. Lish? What is Owen's punishment? How does she react to his punishment?

Mrs. Lish knows she upsets Owen by confirming that Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe have had an affair. She enjoys laughing at Owen's reaction to this news. He believes that his insult to her is an appropriate response to her behavior.

Many of the faculty come to Owen's defense, so instead of throwing him out of school, Owen is placed on probation for the remainder of the semester. He is not grateful to the faculty for their efforts to keep him in school and stops writing columns as "The Voice" because he does not think he deserves to be punished at all. He plans to make his opinions known at commencement, because he does not think anyone can censor his valedictorian speech.

8. What is Owen referring to when he says something is “MADE FOR TELEVISION”? What does this opinion reference?

Answers will vary. Example: When Owen refers to something as being “MADE FOR TELEVISION,” he is implying that it is a ridiculous incident with simplistic moral messages, so it is perfect entertainment for television audiences. Owen’s belief echoes Grandmother’s feelings about television.

9. What does Owen talk about to Reverend Merrill and Doctor Dolder? What is Owen’s favorite topic?

Owen answers any questions they ask him truthfully. Owen says, “I TALK ABOUT DOCTOR DOLDER WITH PASTOR MERRILL, AND I TALK ABOUT PASTOR MERRILL WITH DOCTOR DOLDER.” Owen likes to talk about the resurrection, the possibility of “LIFE AFTER DEATH.” (Pg. 385)

10. Briefly describe “THE IDEA.”

Doctor Dolder’s Volkswagen Beetle is parked in Owen’s way. His red pickup did not start, so he is driving the large trailer-truck. Owen’s “idea” is to ask some of the large basketball players to pick up the car and place it in the middle of the stage of the Great Hall, where Randolph White stands for his morning meeting. Owen makes sure that the Beetle is not damaged in any way.

11. In what way is John, when he lives in Toronto, similar to his elderly grandmother, who lived at 80 Front Street?

Both John and his grandmother are stimulated by, and seem to enjoy, critiquing the world. Grandmother takes issue with almost everything her maids do, and when she gets a television set, she enjoys complaining about everything she sees on television. John, however, is obsessed with newspapers. He is consumed by the political and moral issues of the day.

12. Why is Owen ultimately dismissed from Gravesend Academy?

Larry Lish tells Randolph White that Owen Meany is the one who made the fake draft cards. White uses this information to throw Owen out of school; Irving uses the word “crucified,” another indication that Owen is to be thought of as a Christ-figure. (Pg. 398)

13. What might the statue of Mary Magdalene that Owen straps to the stage symbolize?

Answers will vary. Example: Owen removes her arms. Irving again repeats the motif of armlessness in this novel. In this case, though, it symbolizes Owen’s helplessness in the face of injustice. In its headless, the statue resembles the dressmaker’s dummy. In this way, Owen is linking the statue to Tabitha (she was struck in the head). Owen believes he saw the Angel of Death in Tabitha’s room, but he was helpless to protect her from God’s will or from her fate.

14. What request does Owen make of Reverend Merrill? Why does Owen begin to cry during their meeting?

Owen asks Reverend Merrill to pray for him. Owen cries when Merrill mentions the dream. Merrill tries to tell Owen that it is just a dream, but Owen disagrees; he believes the events in the dream are going to happen.

15. Randolph White does his best to stop Owen from attending any university. How does Owen overcome this problem?

Owen joins the Reserved Officers Training Corps. The government pays for Owen's education, he takes a few U.S. Army classes, and he must serve four years in the military when he graduates.

16. What is the fourth thing Owen learns from his dream after he is kicked out of school and joins the ROTC? How does he feel about this new information?

Owen learns how he is going to die from the dream. He knows that he is going to be a hero. Owen feels that he is going to need God's help because what he is doing in the dream looks very hard.

17. Find an instance of a paradox in the opinions John states about Ronald Reagan.

The paradox is the "unclear firmness" of Reagan's beliefs. (Pg. 357)

18. Explain the reference to the title of the book.

While the morning meeting takes place, Reverend Merrill follows Owen's request and tells the congregation, "Let us pray for Owen Meany." (Pg. 414) There is quite a bit of foreshadowing in this chapter: the inscription on the headstone, Owen's future revealed in the dream, the hymn sung after the prayer for Owen, and the references to the headmaster's firing. It can be assumed that the prayer is not given simply because Owen was dismissed from Gravesend Academy; it probably hints at Owen's death.

Chapter 8 – The Finger

Vocabulary Words

arduous – difficult

attrition – loss of personnel

insurgent – a rebel

purblind – almost blind

verisimilitude – the appearance of being true or real

1. Why does John feel that Owen and Hester are not a happy couple?

Owen has lost his ability to have fun. Because he believes he knows his destiny, Owen thinks that God has given him a role that he is powerless to change. Hester is generally mad at the world. John, Noah, and Simon are not even sure if Hester and Owen sleep together despite “living together as man and wife.” (Pg. 418)

2. For what reason does Charlie refer to John as a “nonpracticing homosexual”? (Pg. 423) What do you think is the source of John’s sexual problems?

Charlie notices that John is an attractive man who does not have a girlfriend and has never had a girlfriend.

Answers will vary. Example: It does not matter whether or not John is a homosexual. He is so psychologically damaged that he cannot have any kind of a sexual relationship. His sexual inadequacy is probably tied to his need to discover the identity of his father and to his relationship with Owen.

3. Some critics believe that Marilyn Monroe, a sex symbol who is used by the world and then dies, represents what happens to John: a sexuality damaged by the traumas of life. Others believe that she represents America, because like America she is no longer young, she is a little stupid, and she tries to be good. What do you think Marilyn Monroe represents in this story? Quote passages from the chapter to support your answer.

Answers will vary. Example: Owen compares Marilyn Monroe to America in the following passage: “IF SHE WAS EVER WITH THE KENNEDYS, THEY COULDN’T HAVE LOVED HER—THEY WERE JUST USING HER, THEY WERE JUST BEING CARELESS AND TREATING THEMSELVES TO A THRILL. THAT’S WHAT POWERFUL MEN DO TO THIS COUNTRY—IT’S A BEAUTIFUL, SEXY, BREATHLESS COUNTRY, AND POWERFUL MEN USE IT TO TREAT THEMSELVES TO A THRILL! THEY SAY THEY LOVE IT BUT THEY DON’T MEAN IT. THEY SAY THINGS TO MAKE THEMSELVES APPEAR GOOD—THEY MAKE THEMSELVES APPEAR MORAL.” (Pg. 430) Marilyn Monroe could also represent:

Perfection and the inability to achieve or preserve it

Success at a high cost

Repressed and exploited sexuality

Loss of innocence

A sexuality so overpowering that it is difficult to comprehend

Naivete

Vulnerability

4. In Owen's opinion, what is the real reason Americans protest against the Vietnam War?

Owen thinks that Americans protest the war only because they are afraid of being drafted. If there were no draft, he thinks there would be no protests.

5. What is John referring to in the following passage from the story: "I was twenty-one and I was still a Joseph; I was a Joseph then, and I'm just a Joseph now"? (Pg. 439)

John is still a virgin. He is a man who is a witness to life but does not fully participate in it himself. Joseph in the Bible was secondary to Mary, just as Johnny is made to appear less important than Owen.

6. Why does John refer to the death of President Kennedy as the "triumph of television"? (Pg. 442) What do you think television might represent in this story?

He thinks that television acts as a witness to the untimely Kennedy death. It makes Kennedy into an instant hero by romanticizing death.

Answers will vary. Example: Television represents America's moral decline. It blurs the line between what is good and what is evil. Kennedy is judged by the America people to be a hero because they are able to view the assassination, not because of anything he did in his life. Television is as demoralizing and addictive as the drugs and alcohol that killed Buzzy Thurston. Television rots people's minds, but they enjoy it anyway, as Grandmother does. Television is also the way in which America first learned directly about death, war, fraud, and many other evils.

7. In what ways does Owen alter the new statue of Mary Magdalene?

She is no longer in an archway. He changes her colors so she is a natural gravestone-gray. The statue is positioned so that she appears to be rising from her grave.

8. What is Owen's goal when he insists they continue to practice "The Shot"?

He wants to be able to do it in three seconds every time. No reason is provided for Owen's insistence; it is revealed in the novel's climax.

9. What is Owen's opinion of the Vietnam War? Why does he want to go to Vietnam?

He thinks there is no good way to end the war because it involves guerilla warfare. The only way to win is to obliterate the whole country, in his opinion. Owen does not want to sit out the war behind a desk. He thinks that if he is in Vietnam, he might be able to keep idiots like Harry Holt from getting killed. Owen also believes that God wants him to go to Vietnam. He thinks that it is his destiny.

10. Why is John worried that he might have “betrayed” Owen?

John knows that Owen wants to be assigned to a combat position. He tells Colonel Eiger that he thinks Owen’s emotional stability is questionable.

11. What new information about Owen’s dream is revealed in this chapter? Describe the dream.

Owen believes that he is going to die in Vietnam while saving children. In his dream, he does not hear the explosion, but there is a ringing in his ears. The children slowly get up from the floor, and Owen notices how they look at him. He knows that he has saved them and that he does not have any arms, another reference to the helplessness, amputation, and armlessness motif in the book. A nun is in the room, serving as Owen’s new Angel of Death. She cradles him in her arms, and he feels very peaceful. Owen then feels as if he is looking down on the scene, and soon he is floating above everything.

12. What is Owen’s assignment after graduation? How does he feel about it?

He is assigned to a communications command in Arizona, but Owen thinks it is just an interim assignment, and he continues to apply for a combat position.

13. What two things does Owen do in this chapter that might be classified under the heading of “unfinished business,” things that he might want to do before his death?

Owen goes to Sawyer Depot, and he gives his valedictorian commencement speech to an empty field.

14. Before leaving for Arizona, Owen insists that John and Hester join him one last time in the closet at 80 Front Street. They hold hands and he says, “DON’T BE AFRAID.” (Pg. 492) What does this closet represent in this story? Why do you think he tells Hester and John not to be afraid?

Answers will vary. Example: The closet represents their childhood. Owen is telling them to face the future, which includes death, without fear.

15. Owen tells John that he (John) needs to make a decision about what he is going to do when his draft deferment expires. He tells John to find the courage to act. John responds by saying that he thinks whatever happens is “up for grabs,” so he does not need courage. Some critics think this exchange is a discussion of free will. In what sense does Owen, who feels he knows the manner of his own death, believe that man has free will?

Answers will vary. Example: Some decisions are part of a man's free will. Owen thinks that he is free to decide how he tells a family about viewing their loved one's body and that the manner of viewing does matter. In this sense, Owen has free will, and it supercedes the needs or desires of the family of the deceased soldier. He also thinks that John has free will to decide to go to Vietnam or live in Canada.

16. Find the irony in Owen's desire when he and John leave Lake Francis.

Owen says that Canada is "A NICE COUNTRY TO LIVE IN." (Pg. 491) It is ironic because John does live there and because, if they had crossed the border into Canada, they would have lead different lives than they do.

17. Owen reveals to John that he is in Owen's dream. Owen thinks the dream takes place in Vietnam. In your opinion, do you think Owen believes he can change the dream by cutting off John's finger and thus preventing him from going to Vietnam? What sentences indicate that he is doing this for John's sake and not for his own?

Answers will vary. Example: Owen believes in free will. He thinks that John can decide whether to go to Vietnam or have Owen cut his (John's) finger off and stay in Canada. Owen will cut off the finger painlessly. The last line in the chapter supports this idea. "JUST THINK OF THIS AS MY LITTLE GIFT TO YOU." (Pg. 509) The sentence Owen says immediately before cutting off the finger reiterates his belief in free will. "YOU CAN DO ANYTHING YOU WANT TO DO-IF YOU BELIEVE YOU CAN DO IT." (Pg. 508)

Chapter 9 – The Shot

Vocabulary Words

addlepated – dull, foolish

disabuse – to rid of false ideas

incipiently – in the first stage of existence; just beginning to exist or come to notice

parochial – narrow

precognition – the perception of an event before it occurs

unctuous – a smug, smooth pretense

1. John writes that "my finger is a perfect fit; we handicapped people must learn to make the best of our mutations and disfigurements." (Pg. 511) Who else might John be referring to? In what sense does Hester make the best of her "mutations and disfigurements"?

John also means that Owen has made the best of his size and voice. Hester is a very angry young woman. She is damaged by Owen's death and by the injustice she perceives from her parents. Hester makes the best of her problems by turning herself into a successful hard-rock star called "Hester the Molester."

2. How does John explain his continuing virginal state?

He believes that the events of his life have “neutered” him. He thinks that his virginity is valuable only if he keeps it.

3. Briefly describe the two incidents when John believes he has “heard” from Owen after Owen’s death.

John is in the secret closet at 80 Front Street when he loses his balance on the stairs. He feels a small, strong hand guide him to the light switch and pull him forward to keep him from tumbling down the stairs. Then he hears Owen’s voice say, “DON’T BE AFRAID. NOTHING BAD IS GOING TO HAPPEN TO YOU.” (Pg. 517)

The second time John thinks he hears from Owen is when Owen seems to possess the body of Reverend Merrill. Reverend Merrill, using Owen Meany’s voice, instructs John to open the third drawer of the desk. The baseball that killed Tabitha is in that drawer. It is clear to John that Reverend Merrill is his biological father and that Owen has finally made sure John discovers this information.

4. John’s dislike of America and American politics seems to stem from his grief and anger over Owen’s death. He blames the country for losing his best friend. Find a passage in this chapter that supports this idea.

Answers will vary. Example: “Let bygones be bygones—not even Owen would still be angry. Do you think Owen Many would have blamed the whole country for what happened to him?” (Pg. 522)

5. Why does Reverend Merrill refuse to accept John’s explanation that Owen’s death, happening in essentially the same way Owen saw it in his dreams, is a miracle?

Reverend Merrill thinks that Owen is an extraordinary young man, who may have had visions and moments of precognition, but Merrill does not think these visions are God’s work.

6. In what way does John believe both God and Mr. and Mrs. Meany use Owen? In your opinion, do you think John believes the Meanys when they declare that Owen is similar to Jesus?

John believes Owen’s parents lie to him when they tell him that he (Owen) was the result of a “virgin birth.” Mr. and Mrs. Meany told Owen about his extraordinary birth when he was eleven years old. John thinks Owen was very vulnerable at this age and that such a revelation serves to fuel the belief that Owen is God’s instrument.

Answers will vary. Example: John believes the parents because he has seen evidence of Owen's miracles.

7. What evidence does anyone have which demonstrates that Owen knows the exact date of his death?

Mr. Meany knows that Owen carved the inscription on the tombstone before leaving for Arizona. It has Owen's correct rank and date of death, and it is another indication of his connection to God.

8. Why is John disappointed to discover that Reverend Merrill is his father? Why does Merrill lose his faith when Tabitha dies?

John is disappointed in Merrill because Merrill refuses to admit that Owen Meany manages to reach beyond the grave and help John discover the identity of his father. John also is disappointed in Merrill because Merrill lacks faith and courage. He lacks the faith to believe in a miracle like Owen, and he lacks the courage to have told John the truth about himself.

Merrill felt self-loathing whenever he saw Tabitha. Just before she was killed, he prayed to God that she would drop dead. Since then, Merrill has been unable to pray, because he thinks God is punishing him for trifling with prayer. This essential part of the book, Tabitha's death, is another instance of Irving meshing sexuality and spirituality. Some others are John's virginity, Merrill's confusing the Catholic statue with Tabitha, and Owen's erection while portraying Jesus.

9. How does John help Reverend Merrill regain his faith? In what sense is this incident ironic?

John gets the dressmaker's dummy from the Meany home. He then places it in the bushes so that from a distance it might look like his mother, and he throws the found baseball through the church window. When Merrill comes outside, he sees the dressmaker's dummy and thinks it is Tabitha. He imagines that she is angry with him for revealing his identity to John.

It is ironic that Reverend Merrill's faith is restored by a fake miracle, because he refuses to believe in Owen's miraculous life. After the dressmaker's dummy incident, Merrill believes in God and in Owen Meany: "I had fooled him with a dressmaker's dummy; Owen Meany had been the real miracle, but my father's faith was restored by an encounter with a dummy..." (Pg. 568)

10. What do you think Reverend Merrill's stutter represents in this story?

Reverend Merrill stutters when he doubts the existence of God. When his faith is restored, his stutter disappears.

11. In the following passage, John discusses his faith. The question of whether or not a man can fully and faithfully believe in God without “proof” of His existence is one of the central themes of this novel. Write a statement of this theme based on this selection.

At times I envy Lewis Merrill; I wish someone could trick me the way I tricked him into having such absolute and unshakable faith. For although I believe I know what the *real* miracles are, my belief in God disturbs and unsettles me much more than *not* believing ever did; unbelief [sic] seems vastly harder to me now than belief does—but belief poses so many unanswerable questions! (Pg. 571)

Answers will vary. Example: It is normal for a person who believes in God and miracles to sometimes experience doubts. A person who refuses to believe, though, has fewer doubts.

12. In what way does Owen think God is testing him? How does Owen’s doubt relate to the experience of Jesus?

Owen realizes that he is not going to die in Vietnam, because there is not enough time left for him to get there. He wonders if he is wrong about Vietnam and if perhaps he is wrong about the date of his death. He wonders if maybe what he has believed all his life is in actuality just a dream. Owen is experiencing a moment of doubt but finally decides that he must trust in the Lord. Prior to Jesus’ crucifixion, he asks God to release him from his future if it is not really necessary for him to be killed. A moment later, Jesus submits to God’s will. Owen sees the Vietnamese children and realizes that God’s will has brought them to him to be saved, and he goes to his death peacefully with this knowledge.

13. In the end, what reason does Owen see for his strange voice? In what ways does his obsession with “the shot” help him to save the children?

The children respond to Owen’s strange voice and follow his instructions without question. Owen had been obsessed with practicing “the shot.” As it turns out, Owen and John need to execute it perfectly to prevent the children from being killed by the grenade.

14. What do you think is the significance of the title of this story?

Answers will vary. Example: John asks God to give Owen back. Owen embodies the qualities of courage, vision, morality, friendship, and compassion. John wants to see these values returned to the world.

A Prayer for Owen Meany

Study Guide Student Copy

Chapter 1 – The Foul Ball

Vocabulary Words

ell – an extension to a house

heterodox – departing from or opposed to the usual beliefs or doctrines

imperious – overbearing, arrogant

lexicon – dictionary

martyr – a person who suffers or dies rather than give up faith or principles

matriarchal – ruled by a woman

morosely – ill-tempered, sullen

obdurate – unrepentant

sagamore – a Native American chief

sedition – rebellious

stoic – remaining indifferent to the external world and to passion or emotion

translucent – partially transparent

1. Why does the narrator say, “I am doomed to remember a boy with a wrecked voice...”? (Pg. 1) Where is the narrator living at the time he is writing this memoir? What is the setting of the story?
2. Briefly describe Owen Meany.
3. What nickname do the other baseball players give to Owen? What role does Owen play on the baseball team? How does Owen feel about baseball?

4. The narrator writes "Owen was no rat. As vividly as any number of the stories in the Bible, Owen Meany showed us what a martyr was." (Pg. 6) In what sense is Owen Meany a martyr in his elementary and Sunday schools?
5. Why is Watahantowet's totem that of an armless man? What do you think the lack of arms might represent in this story?
6. Why does Johnny Wheelwright feel angry toward his mother after her death?
7. Johnny writes, "And although I didn't believe him that day, that was the day Owen Meany began his lengthy contribution to my belief in God." (Pg. 10) Johnny and Owen are throwing rocks and discussing the identity of Johnny's father. In what way does Owen, in the course of this conversation, contribute to Johnny's belief in God?
8. Briefly describe both Johnny's and Owen's families.
9. Why does Johnny's mother decide not to go to college? How does Johnny feel about his mother's singing lessons?
10. Who is Lydia? In what sense is she a literary double or a substitute for Johnny's grandmother?
11. Some critics believe that Owen is a Christ-like character. In what sense might the incident when Owen tricks his friends who are swimming at the quarry support this idea?

12. Why is the Reverend Lewis Merrill of the Congregational Church upset when Johnny and his mother decide to attend the Episcopal Church after she marries Dan?
13. Why does Owen's family move from the Catholic Church to the Episcopal Church? How does Owen feel about the Catholic Church services?
14. Briefly describe Mrs. Meany. Why does Owen think it is not possible for him to attend the Gravesend Academy?
15. Find a passage in this chapter that illustrates Owen's interest in helping humanity, which serves to reinforce the idea that he is a Christ-like figure.
16. How does Owen feel about Johnny's mother?
17. For what reasons does Johnny think Owen keeps the baseball that has killed his mother? What might the baseball symbolize in this story?
18. Find an example of foreshadowing in this chapter.

Chapter 2 – The Armadillo

Vocabulary Words

adjudicate – to judge

animosity – strong dislike, hatred

assuage – to lessen

bastion – a fortified place

consecrated – made holy

diminutive – very small, tiny

euphemistically – substituting a word or phrase that is less distasteful or offensive

garish – too bright, gaudy, showy

immolation – to kill as a sacrifice

imperious – overbearing, arrogant

palaver – talk, idle chatter

potable – fit to drink

predestination – the doctrine that God foreordains everything that happens

rapaciousness – greediness, voraciousness

slatternly – carelessly, sloppily

suppliant – a person who is praying or asking humbly and earnestly

trepidation – fearful uncertainty, anxiety

trysts – secret meetings

wanton – sexually loose or open

1. In what ways is Johnny's mother "catlike"?
2. In what ways is Dan Needham different from Tabitha's other beaux? What might his name represent in this story?
3. How do Johnny and Owen feel about the armadillo?
4. Why is Johnny both crazy about and terrified of his cousins? How does he feel about Hester? Find an instance of hyperbole in Irving's description of water skiing.

5. Johnny writes:

Privately, I continue to be more forgiving of Hester than her own family is. I think she was up against a stacked deck from the start, and that everything she would become began for her when Noah and Simon made me kiss her—because they made it clear that kissing Hester was punishment, the *penalty* part of the game; to have to kiss Hester meant you had lost. (Pg. 57)

What does this passage foretell about Hester's future life? If you have read Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, discuss the ways Hester in *A Prayer For Owen Meany* is similar to the Hester in that novel and how the allusion to Hawthorne's heroine helps you understand this Hester.

6. Why is Johnny afraid to introduce Owen to his cousins? In what sense are Owen and the armadillo linked?
7. Why does Hester scream when she first sees Owen?
8. Find a passage in this chapter that illustrates the image of Owen as a Christ-like figure.
9. What evidence is there that Owen might feel some sexual attraction to Hester?
10. What is the major reason Owen is upset about wetting his pants?

11. In what way does Owen think Johnny has misjudged his cousins?
12. Why does Owen give Johnny all of his baseball cards? What does Dan suggest Johnny do with the cards?
13. How do Johnny's experiences with the armadillo help to shape his adult belief in the "special purpose" of events and things?
14. One of the themes in this novel is the narrator's belief in predestination. Find a passage in this story which seems to support this theme.
15. What message is Owen giving to Johnny when he returns the armadillo without its claws?
16. In what sense is Owen a "Chosen One"?
17. Why do you suppose all of Owen's words are written in capital letters?
18. Find two statements in this chapter which are anti-American.

19. Irving often uses the literary technique of foreshadowing so readers know something is hinted at, and the suspense will keep them interested enough in the story to continue reading. What sentence at the end of this chapter is foreshadowing?
20. What does Owen think about the Vietnam War?
21. Since the book begins with Johnny's mother's death in Chapter One, and in this section Tabitha is alive, what literary term is the author using?

Chapter 3 – The Angel

Vocabulary Words

amulet – an object worn on the body because it is believed to have the power to protect against injury or evil (see talisman)

firmament – the heavens

literally – actually, in fact

provincialism – narrowness of outlook

sepulchral – of the grave or burial; dismal; gloomy

stoical – showing indifference to joy, grief, pleasure, or pain; unflinching under suffering

talisman – anything thought to have magic powers; a charm to keep away evil (see amulet)

torpor – a state of being dormant or inactive

virulent – extremely poisonous or injurious

1. The dress dummy is important to Tabitha: “There was not a night when my mother lay in her bed unable to see the comforting figure of the dressmaker’s dummy; it was not only her confederate against the darkness, it was her double.” (Pg. 95) What might the dressmaker’s dummy symbolize in this story? In what sense is it a double for Tabitha?
2. Why does Owen decide to remain “bravely” in Tabitha’s room after he sees the angel?
3. For what reasons does Owen believe that there are no accidents in life? How does his belief in predestination and patterns relate to Tabitha’s death?
4. Owen is “exact” in what he says. He means things literally. Knowing this, what is the significance of his observation that when Grandmother sees Owen in Tabitha’s room she begins “WAILING LIKE A BANSHEE.” (Pg. 105) What other elements point toward Tabitha’s death?

5. Briefly describe Reverend Lewis Merrill and Reverend Dudley Wiggin. What is Owen's opinion of each man? How does Johnny feel about them?
6. In what sense does John take a "particularly Yankee view" of Reverend Merrill and Reverend Wiggin? What viewpoints does John assign to the "Yankees"?
7. Find a passage in this story where the narrator makes an ironic comment about democracy and explain the irony.
8. In what sense does the Vietnam War destroy both Harry Holt and Buzzy Thurston? Find an instance of litotes on page 127.
9. What is Mrs. Holt's opinion of people who criticize the President of the United States or the Vietnam War?
10. Why do many of the mourners at Tabitha's funeral cover their ears?
11. Why do both Owen and Johnny go to Tabitha's grave? Owen is there first and hears Johnny and Hester calling his name. Why does he shout, "I HEAR YOU!...WHAT DO YOU WANT? WHAT ARE YOU DOING? WHAT DO YOU WANT OF ME?" (Pg. 139)

12. For what reasons does Owen want to go to Dan's place to get the dummy?
13. Find a passage in this chapter that foreshadows a future use for the dummy.
14. What might the color red represent or symbolize in this story? Hints: Tabitha never wears the red dress. The red dress is on the dummy when Owen takes it from Dan's home. Dan has red hair. As an adult, Johnny observes holy days, or "red-letter" days. When Owen first meets Johnny's cousins, his face is red from riding his bicycle.

Chapter 4 – The Little Lord Jesus

Vocabulary Words

dirgeful – sad music; like a funeral hymn

curmudgeon – ill-mannered, bad-tempered person

fastidious – very refined; exceptionally clean

literal – based on the actual words; not figurative or symbolic

orthodoxy – sticking to established doctrines

procrastinate – to put off doing something until a future time

appellation – a name or title

tremulous – trembling or quivering

facetiousness – humor

1. Where does Johnny decide to live after his mother's death? What is the adult narrator's opinion of Christmas?
2. List the changes Owen wants to make in the traditional Christmas pageant and the reason he thinks each change is important.
3. What is Owen's definition of a happy boarder at the Academy? Why does he think that dormitories are evil? What are Owen and Johnny really searching for when they go through the dormitory rooms?
4. One of the motifs in this story is Owen's dislike of Catholics. Find a passage in this story to support this idea.
5. Critics believe that one of the overall themes for this novel is that sexuality is powerful enough to overcome morality. They also believe that this is a coming of age story. Cite an incident from this chapter which seems to illustrate both of these ideas.

6. What is the “doubt” referred to in the passage below? Why is it significant that Owen casts himself in the role of baby Jesus?

And Owen, who had built a huge nest for himself—in a mountain of hay—appeared to radiate the truly untouchable quality of a deity to be reckoned with, of a prophet who had no doubt. (Pg. 168)

7. John the Evangelist was the author of the Fourth Gospel. His function is that of a witness and a recorder of Jesus’ life and words. What evidence is there in this chapter that Owen has cast Johnny in the same role?
8. What indications are there in this chapter that Owen, despite his diminutive size and young age, is a leader who takes charge of a situation?
9. What is striking about the Meany family crèche? One of the motifs in this novel is that of armlessness or amputation. Find an example of this motif in this story.
10. How does Owen feel about coincidences, such as the fact that Johnny and Owen are under the bridge just as *The Flying Yankee* roars across?
11. What, according to Owen, is the reason for his unusual voice? How does Germaine feel about Owen’s voice?

12. Why are the address and phone number of Tabitha's music teacher important to Grandmother?
13. In what way is the incident with the Brinker-Smiths not a coincidence? How does it help to place Owen in the right place at the right time?
14. Owen tries to convince Mr. Morrison that the role of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come is a great part. He says, "THERE'S NOTHING AS SCARY AS THE FUTURE." Grandmother agrees with Owen. She knows that "nothing is as scary as the future...unless it's someone who *knows* the future." (Pg. 195) What future does Grandmother "know" about?
15. An epithet is an adjective or phrase which delineates one's personality by pointing out the attributes possessed by that person. For example, in this story, Owen is sometimes referred to as "The Granite Mouse." Find another epithet which is used to describe and refer to Owen. Explain what attribute "The Granite Mouse" might be hinting at.
16. What do Owen's two parts, that of the Christ child and that of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, have in common?

Chapter 5 – The Ghost of the Future

Vocabulary Words

acquiescent – consenting

deleterious – harmful

eclectic – various and different

genuflect – to bend the knee, as in reverence or worship

lascivious – lustful

lugubrious – very sad and gloomy

morose – gloomy

nave – the part of a church that is between the side aisles

penultimate – next to last

perfunctory – without care or concern, indifferent

petulant – impatient or irritable

proliferation – spreading

provocative – tending to provoke to action

quintessential – most nearly perfect manifestation

sanguinary – bloody

tripartite – divided into three parts

vociferously – vehemently; loudly

1. Why does Dan think it might be a good thing if Owen has a cold when he plays the role of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come?
2. Why do you think Owen does not want to invite his parents to see the play?
3. Why is Owen cranky as Mrs. Wiggin tries to wrap him in his swaddling clothes?
4. Find an incident in this chapter that supports the idea that Owen symbolizes the connection between mankind and God.

5. In what way is Owen's question, "WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING HERE?" misinterpreted by the audience? (Pg. 219)
6. Why is it ironic that the adult John has strong, disturbing opinions about Reagan? Does this switch from a young narrator to a mature one confuse you? Why do you think Irving changed times?
7. Why is John upset when Reagan authorizes a test of nuclear weapons?
8. Canon Mackie says John lives in the past. What evidence is there in this chapter that he may be correct in his assessment of John?
9. In what ways has the Christmas that occurred in 1953 changed the story of Christ in John's mind?
10. In what sense does the audience at the performance of Dan's play disturb Johnny?
11. What frightens Owen during the Dickens play? How does Johnny try to explain Owen's vision?
12. What connection do Grandmother and Germaine make between Lydia's death and Owen's vision?

13. Cite an incident in this chapter that illustrates that Johnny is becoming sexually aware. In what sense does Johnny think his lust is evidence that his father is becoming a larger part of him?
14. How does Owen convince Johnny that he truly saw his name on the tombstone? What information from the vision does Owen withhold from Johnny? What is Johnny's reaction?
15. How does the last paragraph contribute to the overall theme of predestination?

Chapter 6 – The Voice

Vocabulary Words

acolytes – assistants; followers

allotment – a portion; a share

androgynous – both male and female in one

ardor – emotional warmth, passion

atheist – one who believes there is no God

banality – dullness

conjecturally – theoretically

coxswain – the person who steers a racing shell and calls out the rowing rhythm for the crew

dyslexia – impairment of the ability to read

gout – acute arthritis with swelling of the feet and hands

haranguing – blustering; harassing

macadam – material used in road making

multifarious – having many kinds or elements

narthex – an enclosed passage in a church

palimony – property settlement claimed by one member of an unmarried couple who separate after having lived together

pestilential – like a plague

portentous – ominous

precocity – ahead of the usual development

prurient – expressing lustful ideas or desires

puerile – childish, immature

rancorousness – bitter hatefulness

sepulchre – a tomb

sinewy – tough, strong

whippet – a slender, swift dog

1. Why does Grandmother decide to get a television? In what sense does owning a television seem to add years to her life?
2. Why does Owen admire Liberace? In Dan's opinion, why does Owen admire Liberace? Does Liberace's death from AIDS affect Owen and Grandmother?

3. For what reason does Hester go “ON THE WARPATH” after Noah and Simon are sent to Gravesend Academy? (Pg. 265)
4. Cite an incident from the chapter that illustrates the depth of Owen’s feelings of friendship for John.
5. In the Bible, Mary Magdalene is a reformed prostitute, who faithfully follows Jesus after he forgives her for her sins. She is the first person to discover that his body is not in the tomb after his crucifixion. How does Owen feel about the statue of Mary Magdalene?
6. How does Owen define a miracle?
7. What sentences in this chapter indicate or hint at the possibility that Owen might be ill?
8. Why does Owen think that Johnny may be disappointed if he discovers the identity of his father?
9. What is Owen’s advice to Johnny about Hester?

10. Find a passage in this chapter that suggests to the reader that John, as an adult, thinks of Owen in the same way he (John) might think of Jesus.
11. List three reasons John thinks women are attracted to Owen.
12. What qualities does Owen possess which help him be accepted and even become a leader at the Gravesend Academy?
13. Identify more epithets associated with Owen besides “The Granite Mouse” and “The Prince of Peace.” Why do you suppose there are no epithets for John?
14. Why does Owen want his essays published only in capital letters? How do the faculty at the school feel about “The Voice”?
15. Which sports does Owen enjoy? What is his “absurd goal” when he plays basketball? (Pg. 303) What steps does he take to reach this goal?
16. Why does John go to see the school psychiatrist? How does Owen help John overcome his learning problems?

17. What evidence is there that the adult John constantly thinks about Owen? Why does he sarcastically write, "Oh, what a nation of moralists the Americans are!"? (Pg. 306)
18. Why do you think Owen wants Reverend Merrill to be Mr. Scammon's replacement as the school minister?
19. Briefly describe Randolph White. What sentences indicate that Randolph White's selection as the new headmaster is a disaster for Owen and John? What literary term is used?
20. What do you think the dandelions in this story might represent?
21. How does Owen break the law for the first time? Explain the irony of what he does.
22. List three decisions Randolph White makes that Owen criticizes. Which of White's decisions has the potential to do the most harm to the students?
23. How does Owen feel about John F. Kennedy?

Chapter 7 – The Dream

Vocabulary Words

desultory – jumping from one subject to another

fatalistic – the belief that all events are determined by fate and are inevitable

laconically – briefly

pontificating – speaking in a pompous way

sociopath – an antisocial person

1. Why does Owen refer to John as “Mister Responsibility”?
2. In what ways did Owen prepare for the trip to Boston before he and Johnny left?
3. Why does Owen reject the remedies the music teacher thinks may help correct Owen’s voice problems?
4. For what reasons did Tabitha become “The Lady in Red” once a week? Mr. McSwiney recalls that Tabitha usually sang Frank Sinatra songs, which bored him. What is Owen implying when he says, “I THINK WE CAN ASSUME THAT SOMEBODY LIKED TO LISTEN TO IT.” (Pg. 357)
5. What three things does Owen know about his life?
6. Why does Owen become disillusioned with JFK? In what way does Owen think JFK’s behavior is explained by the fact that he is a Catholic?

7. For what reasons does Owen think he is justified in “propositioning” Mrs. Lish? What is Owen’s punishment? How does she react to his punishment?
8. What is Owen referring to when he says something is “MADE FOR TELEVISION”? What does this opinion reference?
9. What does Owen talk about to Reverend Merrill and Doctor Dolder? What is Owen’s favorite topic?
10. Briefly describe “THE IDEA.”
11. In what way is John, when he lives in Toronto, similar to his elderly grandmother, who lived at 80 Front Street?
12. Why is Owen ultimately dismissed from Gravesend Academy?
13. What might the statue of Mary Magdalene that Owen straps to the stage symbolize?
14. What request does Owen make of Reverend Merrill? Why does Owen begin to cry during their meeting?

15. Randolph White does his best to stop Owen from attending any university. How does Owen overcome this problem?
16. What is the fourth thing Owen learns from his dream after he is kicked out of school and joins the ROTC? How does he feel about this new information?
17. Find an instance of a paradox in the opinions John states about Ronald Reagan.
18. Explain the reference to the title of the book.

Chapter 8 – The Finger

Vocabulary Words

arduous – difficult

attrition – loss of personnel

insurgent – a rebel

purbblind – almost blind

verisimilitude – the appearance of being true or real

1. Why does John feel that Owen and Hester are not a happy couple?
2. For what reason does Charlie refer to John as a “nonpracticing homosexual”? (Pg. 423) What do you think is the source of John’s sexual problems?
3. Some critics believe that Marilyn Monroe, a sex symbol who is used by the world and then dies, represents what happens to John: a sexuality damaged by the traumas of life. Others believe that she represents America, because like America she is no longer young, she is a little stupid, and she tries to be good. What do you think Marilyn Monroe represents in this story? Quote passages from the chapter to support your answer.
4. In Owen’s opinion, what is the real reason Americans protest against the Vietnam War?
5. What is John referring to in the following passage from the story: “I was twenty-one and I was still a Joseph; I was a Joseph then, and I’m just a Joseph now”? (Pg. 439)
6. Why does John refer to the death of President Kennedy as the “triumph of television”? (Pg. 442) What do you think television might represent in this story?
7. In what ways does Owen alter the new statue of Mary Magdalene?
8. What is Owen’s goal when he insists they continue to practice “The Shot”?

9. What is Owen's opinion of the Vietnam War? Why does he want to go to Vietnam?
10. Why is John worried that he might have "betrayed" Owen?
11. What new information about Owen's dream is revealed in this chapter? Describe the dream.
12. What is Owen's assignment after graduation? How does he feel about it?
13. What two things does Owen do in this chapter that might be classified under the heading of "unfinished business," things that he might want to do before his death?
14. Before leaving for Arizona, Owen insists that John and Hester join him one last time in the closet at 80 Front Street. They hold hands and he says, "DON'T BE AFRAID." (Pg. 492) What does this closet represent in this story? Why do you think he tells Hester and John not to be afraid?
15. Owen tells John that he (John) needs to make a decision about what he is going to do when his draft deferment expires. He tells John to find the courage to act. John responds by saying that he thinks whatever happens is "up for grabs," so he does not need courage. Some critics think this exchange is a discussion of free will. In what sense does Owen, who feels he knows the manner of his own death, believe that man has free will?
16. Find the irony in Owen's desire when he and John leave Lake Francis.
17. Owen reveals to John that he is in Owen's dream. Owen thinks the dream takes place in Vietnam. In your opinion, do you think Owen believes he can change the dream by cutting off John's finger and thus preventing him from going to Vietnam? What sentences indicate that he is doing this for John's sake and not for his own?

Chapter 9 – The Shot

Vocabulary Words

addlebrained – dull, foolish

disabuse – to rid of false ideas

incipiently – in the first stage of existence; just beginning to exist or come to notice

parochial – narrow

precognition – the perception of an event before it occurs

unctuous – a smug, smooth pretense

1. John writes that “my finger is a perfect fit; we handicapped people must learn to make the best of our mutations and disfigurements.” (Pg. 511) Who else might John be referring to? In what sense does Hester make the best of her “mutations and disfigurements”?
2. How does John explain his continuing virginal state?
3. Briefly describe the two incidents when John believes he has “heard” from Owen after Owen’s death.
4. John’s dislike of America and American politics seems to stem from his grief and anger over Owen’s death. He blames the country for losing his best friend. Find a passage in this chapter that supports this idea.
5. Why does Reverend Merrill refuse to accept John’s explanation that Owen’s death, happening in essentially the same way Owen saw it in his dreams, is a miracle?

6. In what way does John believe both God and Mr. and Mrs. Meany use Owen? In your opinion, do you think John believes the Meanys when they declare that Owen is similar to Jesus?
7. What evidence does anyone have which demonstrates that Owen knows the exact date of his death?
8. Why is John disappointed to discover that Reverend Merrill is his father? Why does Merrill lose his faith when Tabitha dies?
9. How does John help Reverend Merrill regain his faith? In what sense is this incident ironic?
10. What do you think Reverend Merrill's stutter represents in this story?
11. In the following passage, John discusses his faith. The question of whether or not a man can fully and faithfully believe in God without "proof" of His existence is one of the central themes of this novel. Write a statement of this theme based on this selection.

At times I envy Lewis Merrill; I wish someone could trick me the way I tricked him into having such absolute and unshakable faith. For although I believe I know what the *real* miracles are, my belief in God disturbs and unsettles me much more than *not* believing ever did; unbelief [sic] seems vastly harder to me now than belief does—but belief poses so many unanswerable questions! (Pg. 571)

12. In what way does Owen think God is testing him? How does Owen's doubt relate to the experience of Jesus?
13. In the end, what reason does Owen see for his strange voice? In what ways does his obsession with "the shot" help him to save the children?
14. What do you think is the significance of the title of this story?

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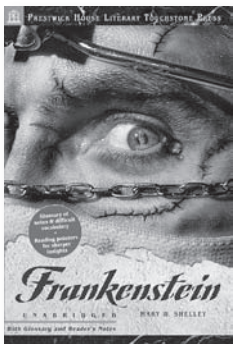
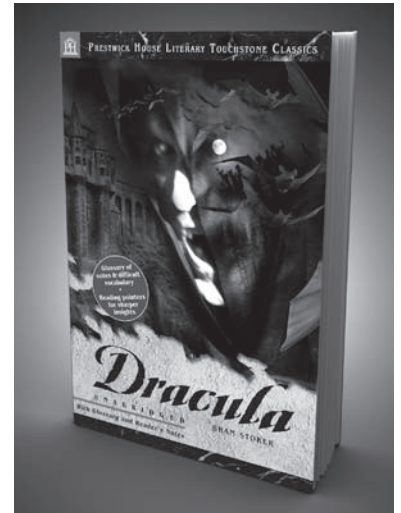
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