

ANALYSIS

A Prayer for Owen Meany (1989)

John Irving

(1942-)

“*A Prayer for Owen Meany* is the Bildungsroman of John Wheelwright, an expatriate bachelor and English teacher living in Toronto, who retrospectively narrates the effects on his life of his boyhood friend, Owen Meany. The lives of the two boys become entwined when Owen hits a line drive that kills Johnny’s mother and when they try to discover the identity of Johnny’s real father.... On the one hand the book is a prayer for Owen, which recalls the poignant scene in which Owen begs Reverend Merrill to offer such a prayer, but on the other hand, it is John who is the ‘pray-er,’ and Owen is the object of his supplications....

Despite...the ironic distancing between John Irving and John Wheelwright, several reviewers seem to conflate them. Patrick Parrinder criticizes John Wheelwright’s misanthropic attitudes and sophomoric immaturity as if they reflected the author’s position; William Pritchard claims that there is no irony in the narration; and Steiner, asserting that the ‘narrator is quite obviously Irving’s shadow,’ finds his reminiscences ‘unspeakably tedious.’ John Wheelwright is ambiguously similar to John Irving, but he is distinct from the author, not a reflection of him. The grownup John Wheelwright, having failed to mature beyond his youthful adoration of Owen, is tedious, sententious and obsessive, and/but he has unshakable faith in Owen’s divinity. Irving thus problematizes the relationships between author and character/narrator, raised necessary but unresolvable questions about the validity of claims of intuitive understanding and thereby questions faith at the same time as he affirms it...

During their boyhood in the New England town of Gravesend, the passive and laconic Johnny is fascinated by the remarkable Owen. Owen leads not only Johnny but all the students at their private school, the Gravesend Academy, by his supreme self-confidence and by his commanding and almost unearthly voice (rendered throughout in capital letters). Through a series of visions and dreams, Owen acquires the belief that he has a divine mission which requires him to die on 7 July 1968, in a tropical setting. Owen also takes charge of Johnny’s life, helping him through school, directing him toward a career as an English teacher, and amputating his finger to keep him out of the Vietnam War. The plot culminates with Owen’s death in a Phoenix airport when he sacrifices himself to save a group of Vietnamese children and nuns. Owen’s commanding presence, his apparent prophetic powers and his martyrdom convince John that his friend was literally the ‘Second Coming.’

In *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, the characters, most prominently Johnny and Owen, are confronted with a rich array of signs—objects, events, texts, other characters—which they have difficulty interpreting.... *A Prayer for Owen Meany*...overwhelms readers with a plethora of signs, and calls particular attention to readers’ presuppositions about interpreting them. Indirectly, the text foregrounds this issue by the multitude of interpretive acts undertaken by the characters. More directly, Irving’s text draws attention to the act of interpretation through its mode of narration. As John retells his life, he unavoidably interprets past events, and this situation forces the reader to consider not only the events, but also the way they may be reconstructed through the process of narration. To accentuate this pattern, John habitually addresses the reader, most noticeably in his refrains of ‘Remember that?’ and ‘as you can see,’ which in their shrill insistence force the reader to participate and interpret....

Owen, as the central mystery, is the most frequently analyzed character. His unearthly voice requires explanation, and his opinions as ‘The Voice’ are always examined. John as well as other characters use a variety of metaphors to figure Owen. Many metaphors for Owen are other-worldly (Chosen One, angel, god, devil, Jesus Christ, Antichrist), and he plays the parts of Jesus and the Ghost of Christmas Future. Other metaphors place him in a special category of people (holy man, martyr, prophet, child-pharaoh) or associate him with emblematic figures (a figurehead on a ship, a scarecrow, a gnome). Still others compare

him to a small animal—bird, water bug, possum, fish, fox, butterfly, mouse. He is also something to be lifted or hugged (a doll)....

The novel also alludes to and often includes comments on other literary texts, chiefly *The Great Gatsby* and the novels of Thomas Hardy. The references to Fitzgerald's novel suggest parallels between Nick Carraway—the bystander who narrates the story of his idol, Jay Gatsby—and John's relationship to his idol, Owen Meany. The several allusions to Hardy imply that his determinism is comparable to both Owen's emerging conviction that his life is fated and John's necessity to believe in the miraculousness of Owen's life and its effect on his own life. In turn, references to contemporary literature, movies, television and popular music relate the question of interpretation to American culture, and within this context to the effect of the Vietnam War on America and...about America's loss of innocence after that war. John reaches maturity during that crisis, and his inability to come to grips with it and therefore with America contribute greatly to his bitterness....

As Owen says, 'THE REAL MIRACLES AREN'T ANYTHING YOU CAN SEE—THEY'RE THINGS YOU HAVE TO BELIEVE WITHOUT SEEING'.... Faith or understanding as an alternative to explanation is not limited to John's belief in Owen's divinity. Owen's faith in his divine mission and predestined death is a total, instantaneous leap based on inward vision and signs that are not apparent to anyone else and hence are not communicable or reproducible. The 'evidence' that these signs provide must be accepted on faith or intuition, not through a process of explanation or investigation. The data is not external 'facts' but internal mental experience.

Similarly, the novel raises the question of one's faith in one's country. Both Johnny and Owen, especially Owen, and by extension their generation, initially believe in the United States, its government and President Kennedy. Their belief is holistic, not a result of a process of explanation, and *their faith then is tested by the revelations of Kennedy's affair with Marilyn Monroe*. [italics added. Their faith is shaken not by the country's Vietnam War but by the affair of one man?] Both lose their naive faith, but Owen rechannels his into a personal and divinely inspired mission, whereas John, never recovering from the loss, becomes neurotically embittered toward his country, his life and people in general....

As Wendy Steiner has noted, there are numerous parallels between this novel and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, of which the most significant is the proliferation of signs and attempted explanations. Watahantowet's mark functions like the scarlet letter A. Likewise the Chief's mark, more and more A's (may) appear—in the sky, on Dimmesdale's chest, on the narrator's brain—and their explanations multiply throughout the book and in the voluminous criticism on it.... In *A Prayer*, the explanatory mode is undercut in countless additional ways. It is parodied in Germaine, who sees all things as signs of supernatural influence over human lives... Explanation is reduced to the farcical when Owen's girlfriend Hester vomits on New Year's Eve and he sees it as a sign of the bad year to come and when Hester interprets one of the fireworks as looking 'like sperm'....

As in *Garp*, most of the women and men fail as parents or partners: the Meanys, the Wiggins and the Merrills are hopelessly weak parents; the Dowlings paradoxically try to reverse gender roles; and the Brinker-Smiths engage in a mockery of lovemaking and childrearing. Individually, most men and women fail to develop healthy gender identities: for example, there is Mr. Peabody's effeminacy, Mr. Tubulari's machismo, Mrs. Lish's aggressive femininity and Mary Beth Baird's smothering of Owen.... The sexually benign characters in *Garp*, as well as *Owen*, gain spiritual strength from their androgyny, but for John the loss of the male/female gender dichotomy leads to the abdication of adulthood and to impotent stagnation....

[The] unchecked masculine drive to compete and conquer culminates in the appropriately named Dick Jarvits, the Vietnam veteran who becomes a loaded, phallic weapon intent on killing everything Vietnamese, even the children and the nuns at the Phoenix airport.... Owen personifies Irving's validation of androgyny and benign sexuality: he is powerful yet unthreatening, he is sexually active and yet self-sacrificing, and he is genitally well-endowed yet doll-like. His physical appeal transcends gender—no one can resist touching him. He triumphs by hosing his arms and thus symbolically by rejecting the destructive

armaments of other men and the country. In complete contrast to John, Owen does reconcile gender dichotomies.... [Is he also a role model for you as a Christ-evoking figure?]

In addition to these self-doubts about his narration, on numerous occasions John's interpretations turn out to be wrong: he is sure that Owen will dread meeting his cousins, but Owen is confident and assertive; he thinks that Reverend Merrill's silence around him and Owen is because of the minister's awe of Owen, not because Merrill is John's father; and he initially misinterprets Dick Jarvis as an 'overgrown boy' in 'workmen's overalls,' not the deadly killer he is. The discussion of Nick Carraway in the class that John teaches provides a clue about John's status as narrator. Just as John's student remarks that 'I think we're not supposed to trust [Nick]—not completely, I mean,' so John's reliability as a narrator, especially as a witness who claims Owen's divinity, is consistently undermined.... [Critics are virtually unanimous in the view that Nick Carraway is a *reliable* narrator.]

The danger of relying too heavily on either term of traditional oppositions is illustrated most poignantly by John Wheelwright, whose self-exile into bitterness, childishness, self-pity and nostalgia stem from, among other causes, his failure to transcend the logic of binary oppositions. He is stuck in the rigidity of oppositional thinking: for example, that the U.S. must be either perfect or damned, that Owen must be either divine or human, and that his own life must be either wonderful or terrible. John's stagnation in oppositional thinking corresponds to his inability to progress beyond... 'naïve understanding' and 'empirical explanation'...

At first one might argue that Owen represents the danger of over-reliance on faith, since his faith in fulfilling his destiny and serving God lead to his early death [and glory in Heaven, if you are a believer. His sacrifice to save others is a "danger" to an Atheist.] This is close to Hester's view, biases as she is toward keeping him alive. Yet Owen... works through a long period of empirical explanation, and then demonstrates his acquisition of an integrated self through his composure, his self-confidence, his eager acceptance of his responsibilities once that destiny becomes clear to him, and his sense of what William James calls an 'ecstasy of happiness' as he completes that destiny.

Owen's experience corresponds... to [William] James's criteria of religious experience: a sense of certainty, a sense of perceiving new truths, 'an immediate elation and freedom, as the outlines of the confining selfhood melt down'; a shift from an emotional 'no' to an emotional 'yes.' For Owen, as for James's mystic, the authority of rational consciousness collapses, replaced by his 'affective experience' and his sense of union with the spiritual universe. His actions and words, his life, become inseparable from his perceived mission to save the lives of Johnny and the Vietnamese children.

John Irving and John Wheelwright shape the narrative so that it culminates in the lengthy account of Owen's heroic death in a temporary restroom in the Phoenix airport. The climax occurs when Johnny lifts Owen to the windowsill, a reiteration of 'the shot' which the two boys had practiced endlessly on a basketball court, so that Owen can smother Dick Jarvis's grenade, thus saving the Vietnamese children, the nuns and Johnny, but killing himself. In that account, all the novel's motifs come together, such as Owen's commanding voice and leadership, armlessness, the debilitating effects of the Vietnam War on America, and Owen's possible divinity. On the one hand, the account reflects John's overblown sentimentality for Owen and his clearly biased claims of Owen's divinity and foreknowledge of events. On the other hand, the account, especially of Owen's death and subsequent ascent, will inspire even the most skeptical: 'We did not realize that there were forces beyond our play...'

Irving seems to have it both ways: he pressures readers to be wary of over-reliance on any principle, any abstraction, any target of interpretation, any article of faith or any method of knowing—no matter how noble sounding, intriguing or persuasive. Yet, having debunked all such notions, Irving nevertheless demonstrates the power of transcendent faith. Readers are led to doubt, yet they are moved."

Philip Page
"Hero Worship and Hermeneutic Dialectics:
John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*"
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“Tabby Wheelwright conceives her son but blithely tells no one the source of the child—not her mother, not her husband, married later, and not her son himself—before she dies unexpectedly. John Wheelwright’s ambivalence about discovering his father’s identity is sign—and, perhaps, cause—of his characteristic passivity; curious when young, he seems to lose interest, and has to be prodded by Owen Meany, a voice from beyond the grave, to recognize his father at last. But this ambivalence is key in the overall design of the narrative. Although the ‘discovery’ is placed conventionally, toward the end of the novel, it is mostly stripped of its drama, its authority over the events of the narrative, and its power to illuminate identity, in part because, unlike Siggy, John has not romanticized his origins. His disappointment in finding that the ineffectual Reverend Lewis Merrill is his father and his rejection of filial connection to Merrill, while apparently fulfilling the oedipal aim, which is to individualize himself, apart from paternal identity.

John ironically fails to recognize his resemblance to his father’s passive and detached personality, repressing this opportunity for insight. The only reason he admits for narrating his discovery is that to him the episode represents a ‘miracle’: he believes that he hears Rev. Merrill speaking for Owen Meany’s voice in order to expose himself as John’s father. John’s family romance is thereby displaced from paternal authority into what he interprets as representing divine authority—from the father to the Father. The secular knowledge gained, in itself, is no endpoint at all. In a larger sense, then, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* resists what Sadoff calls the ‘double narrative temporality’ of Dickensian fiction, which drives toward a discovery at the end of the novel even while tracking back toward the novel’s origin by ‘establishing the retrospective evidence of origin throughout the narrative.’ That is, Irving shows little drive toward exposing origin as one of the aims of his narrative. In this manner, he ‘misreads’ the Dickensian plot of absent paternity by disrupting its control over the narrative....

It is...not surprising that Irving reuses the name Merrill for the illusory authority of John Wheelwright’s father in *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. Nevertheless, when the friend-as-surrogate-father configuration appears in Owen’s relationship to John, one can discern a shift in respect to paternal authority that may be ascribed to Irving’s shifting allegiances to his fictional forebears. John Wheelwright clearly depends upon what he interprets as Owen’s superior wisdom. Their friendship rarely seems a relation between equals, and as they grow from boys to young men, it increasingly resembles a father-son relationship. John’s eagerness to submit to Owen’s authority is epitomized when he allows Owen to sever part of his forefinger in order to avoid the draft during the Vietnam war. At the time, John seems to put little thought into the decision, deferring to Owen’s reading of his fate. Of course, this act can be seen as a symbolic castration—a figure of which Irving is rather too fond—and, as such, confirms the power of the ‘father’ in the terms of fantasy; John has relinquished himself to the ‘father’ in Owen, just as he relinquishes his own story to narrate Owen’s. When Owen dies, John is permanently cast adrift, stripped of identity and sexuality (he becomes something of a eunuch, dedicated to the spiritual power he believes to have been invested in Owen), and willfully exiling himself from the home and people he knows.

In a symbolic movement that reverses Homer Wells’s trajectory, John demonstrates at the novel’s close the significant absence of a paternally bestowed sense of identity and place in society. One can infer in John’s fate the obverse of Homer Wells’s: the narrative drive is finally toward affirming the father’s legitimate claims over the son’s identity. Just as it seems likely that Irving’s latterday rejection of the technical ‘showing off’ of the early novels implies a rethinking of the gestures toward narrative freedom represented by the metafictionists, so too does the move from denial of paternal authority in the early novels to acceptance of it in *Cider House Rules* and *Owen Meany* seem a direct result of his return to his Victorian forebears in the shaping of fiction....

The fathers in the novel are all absent, or virtually so, but the source of authority becomes absolute because *A Prayer for Owen Meany* places it in the ultimate Father, God. John Wheelwright, the fatherless narrator, opens his narrative by implying that the following story will be a conversion narrative: he is ‘doomed to remember the boy with a wrecked voice...because he is the reason I believe in God.’ In a sense, this novel conflates in a single quest all of the contradictory perspectives on paternity I have discovered in Irving’s work, by figuring the father in terms of transcendent authority, the Law. John Wheelwright becomes the disciple and mouthpiece for Owen Meany, who interprets his precognitive experiences to mean that he has been in some sense ‘chosen’: he tells John that ‘GOD HAS TAKEN

YOUR MOTHER. MY HANDS WERE THE INSTRUMENT. GOD HAS TAKEN MY HANDS. I AM GOD'S INSTRUMENT."

Owen accepts his perceived role fatalistically; he exhibits doubt only when circumstances suggest to him that his final, heroic act of instrumentality, as he has foreseen it—saving a roomful of children from a grenade—will not take place. Calling it faith, he has in effect accepted the Father's delineation of his identity, at least as he construes it. Both figuratively and, later, literally, he gives up his hands to his God willingly. As a character, Owen's distance from credibility may be measured by his lack of resistance to his intuited fate. John, however, enacts the oedipal drama in relation to the story he vicariously lives through Owen. God is for him the Father who must be either absent...or malevolent, since He has create the violent world (at which John rails through much of the novel's latter half), leaving humans to their innate capacity for corruption and self-destruction.

It is only finally by dint of Owen's self-sacrifice—the confirmation, at least to John, of the miraculousness of Owen's foresight—that John 'finds' the Father. But it is an ambiguous discovery, since John is left drifting in the human world, emotionally sterile and sexually neutered. His recovery of origin does not grant him the power in the worlds of matter or spirit that we have come to expect from the conventions of such a narrative quest."

Debra Shostak
"The Family Romances of John Irving"
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Michael Hollister (2014)