Brian Tomasik
Essay on *Owen Meany*
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There are two principal attitudes that people can adopt toward the events that impact their lives. The first is to actively respond to one's circumstances, by striving to change unfavorable conditions and to participate in meaningful pursuits. The second is to view oneself as a passive spectator who can simply wait for others to get things done. John Irving contrasts these two positions in his novel, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*; in contributing to activities, responding to injustice, and even fulfilling one's own fate, Owen is clearly an active leader while John is consistently a passive follower.

Though he is a short, mouse-like boy with an unusual voice, Owen Meany—the son of a granite quarrier and the friend of John, the narrator—takes charge from the beginning of the novel. Throughout preparations for the annual Christmas pageant, Owen voices his opinions forcefully and effectively on everything from who should play the part of Mary to what animals should be present in the manger; John merely accepts the part of Joseph that Owen recommends for him. Owen likewise takes center stage in the Gravesend production of *A Christmas Carol*, even though he only plays the small part of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come; John, on the other hand, merely watches the rehearsals. Sneaking into the Gravesend-Academy dorm rooms during winter break and trying on the "beetleskins" is Owen's idea; John just goes along with him. Owen helps John with his homework, teaches John to overcome his dyslexia, and even writes many of John's papers, all at the same time that he himself excells to the position of valedictorian. With Owen always in charge, John has little need or opportunity for learning to act on his own.

The sharp contrast between the characters is further evident in their responses to policies that they dislike. Through his editorials for *The Grave*, Gravesend Academy's student newspaper, Owen succeeds in effectuating one change after another, from the serving of non-fish meals on Fridays to the eventual removal of the new headmaster, Mr. White. He is not afraid to protest the transfer of morning meetings from Hurd's Church to The Great Hall by putting Dr. Dolder's car on the stage, or to demonstrate the effect of his dismissal with the headless statue of Mary Magdalene. All the while, John does nothing to impact Gravesend Academy, nor does he bring about any policy changes later in life. Indeed, in Canada, John reads the news as if it were a dangerous addiction, as if he were helpless to do anything but watch the actions of the Reagan administration. Not once does John decide that he will endeavor to change the policies that he despises, to take whatever steps he can to make things better.

The same sort of resistance to action that inhibits John's political efforts is also central to his conception of fate. John seems to think that foretold events will occur all by themselves without his involvement. This at least appears to be the case, given that John is lackadaisical even in his efforts at finding his own father. Indeed, it is Owen who leads the search, finding out about The Orange Grove and talking with the former singing instructor for John's mother. Owen applies even greater sedulousness to ensuring that his dream, saving Vietnamese children at the expense of his own life, comes true: in spite of physical barriers and the opposition of John and Hester, Owen succeeds in being assigned to Vietnam. Unlike his supine friend, Owen believes that predestined events do not happen all by themselves, that people have to actively strive to make them come true.

Near the end of the book, John explains that he loves the study of literature because it only requires listening to what other people have to say; in fact, that idea of merely looking at

what others are doing could describe John's whole life. He does not assume leadership in activities, he does not involve himself in reforming the political policies that he detests, and he does not act to ensure that predicted events actually come about. Instead, John largely just watches Owen as Owen succeeds in accomplishing all of those things and more. In illustrating this sharp contrast between his two main characters, Irving encouraged his readers to think more deeply about the extent to which they themselves are passive or active toward their lives.