

InsideOUT

PRODUCED BY THE DENVER CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

March - April 2009



A PRAYER
FOR  OWEN
MEANY

A Novel by John Irving
Adapted by Simon Bent
Directed by Bruce K. Sevy

March 27 - April 25
The Stage Theatre

Producing Partners
Sheri & Lee
ARCHER

SEASON
SPONSORS



STEINBERG
CHARITABLE TRUST



MEDIA
SPONSORS



THE DENVER
POST

Use of study guide materials for publication requires permission from the Marketing Department of The Denver Center for the Performing Arts.

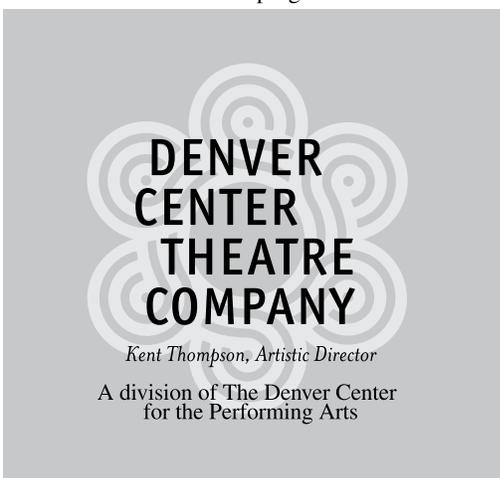
©2009 Denver Center Theatre Company

InsideOUT

Douglas Langworthy Editor
Sally Gass Contributing Writer
David Saphier Education Contributor
Tina Risch Community Services/Group Sales Manager
Jeff Hovorka Director of Media & Marketing
Seth Holt Designer



is proud to support the Denver Center's Arts in Education programs.



ADDITIONAL SUPPORT PROVIDED BY:



JANUS

Anschutz
FOUNDATION



Scientific & Cultural
Facilities District



COLORADO COUNCIL
ON THE ARTS

SYNOPSIS

JOHN: *I am doomed to remember a boy with a wrecked voice—not 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.*

I am a Christian because of Owen Meany.

— A Prayer for Owen Meany

Owen Meany and John Wheelwright are best friends in Gravesend, New Hampshire, between the years of 1953 and 1968. Owen gets teased about his small stature and the high-pitched sound of his voice, while John is tormented because he doesn't know his father's identity. Tabitha Wheelwright, John's mother, claims she met his dad on the Boston-and-Maine railroad, but refuses to divulge any more information. Owen loves Tabitha and assures his friend he will learn about his father when the time is right because it is God's will.

Owen's family owns a granite quarry and, unlike his parents, Owen's faith is rock solid. Even though the Meanys left the Catholic Church for mysterious reasons, Mrs. Meany prays for Owen as she listens to phonograph records to drown out the sound of granite blasting. Mr. Meany complains that the boy spends too much time with rich people like the Wheelwrights.

At the Wheelwright Thanksgiving celebration, Tabitha announces her plan to marry another man she met on the Boston-and-Maine train, Dan Needham. When Dan arrives at dinner, he announces he's been hired as the

drama teacher at Gravesend Academy and gives John, his future stepson, a baseball glove. Both John and Owen are impressed with the man and his gift.

In this small New England town all the characters' lives are connected to Owen. Tabitha loves Owen as a son, but he accidentally ends her life. Grandmother Wheelwright, who dislikes no one, has her doubts about Owen until they bond over *Liberace*. The stuttering Reverend Merrill suggests that "doubt is the cornerstone of faith," but is told by Owen he is in the wrong business. When Dan Needham casts Owen as the Ghost of Christmas Future in the town's production of *A Christmas Carol*, Owen frightens the entire audience when he sees his own fate written on the gravestone. The new headmaster of Gravesend Academy almost expels Owen for being overly familiar with a classmate's mother. In John's journey to adulthood he does not believe that Owen is God's instrument until it is too late.

DENVERCENTER.ORG
» What's New

THE AUTHOR: JOHN IRVING

John Irving was born John Wallace Blunt, Jr. in Exeter, New Hampshire, during World War II. At the time of his birth, his father was serving as an airman in the Pacific. His parents divorced when he was two years old, but his mother remarried in 1948 and he was renamed John Winslow Irving. He never met his biological father.

As a boy John was notably withdrawn because of an inborn love of solitude, a quality he believes has served him well as a writer. He read with difficulty, a learning disorder that today would probably be diagnosed as dyslexia. In spite of this condition, he became an enthusiastic reader and student of literature. As a student at the Philips Exeter Academy, where his stepfather taught Russian history, John Irving began to wrestle competitively, a sport he credits with teaching him discipline and perseverance.

Irving attended the University of Pittsburgh for one year and then moved to Vienna, Austria. He studied at the University of Vienna and toured Europe on a motorcycle, absorbing many of the experiences that would later find their way into his novels. After returning to the United States, he enrolled in the University of New Hampshire and graduated in 1965. He married while still an undergraduate and became a father at 23. Already set on a writing career, he earned an MFA from the Creative Writing program at the University of Iowa.

After completing his graduate degree in 1967, Irving returned to New England with his growing family to take a job as Assistant Professor of English at Windham College in Vermont. His first novel, *Setting Free the Bears*, drew on his European experiences for a darkly comic story of two students who conspire to liberate the animals from the Vienna zoo. Inspired by an actual incident from the last days of World War II, it introduced many of the themes and techniques he has explored in his writings: the disasters of history and the capriciousness of fate. His second novel, *The Water-Method Man*, revisited Vienna and satirized academic life in America. In 1972 Irving was appointed Writer-in Residence at the University of Iowa. His 1974 novel, *The 158-Pound Marriage*, focused on the erotic intrigues of two couples at an American university. In 1975, Irving took a job as Assistant Professor of English at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts and moved back to New England. He has kept a home in the region ever since.

Irving attained popular success with the publication of his fourth novel, *The World According to Garp*, in 1978. Its protagonist was an author who comments on his life and is involved with a set of dizzyingly eccentric characters. Since the international success of *Garp*, every book Irving has written has become a best seller. Nevertheless, he completed his Writer-in Residence appointment at Brandeis University and coached wrestling at prep schools for most of the 1980s.

Irving's next novel, *The Hotel New Hampshire* (1981), presented a cast of vividly imagined eccentric characters. *The Cider House Rules* (1985) is set in Maine in the early decades of the 20th century at an orphanage presided over by a kindly, ether-addicted obstetrician and abortionist. Questions of religion, morality and the randomness of fate figure in Irving's next work, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (1989).

Some of Irving's works have been made into successful films. *The World According to Garp* was released in 1982; *A Prayer for Owen Meany* was filmed under the title *Simon Birch* in 1998. For *The Cider House Rules*, Irving wrote the screenplay himself and earned an Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay in 2000. *A Widow for One Year* (1998) was released in 2004 under the title *A Door in the Floor*.

In the 1990s, Irving's work became increasingly dark and complex. *A Son of the Circus* (1994) introduces us to an East Indian doctor and his memories of childhood in a traveling circus in rural India. *The Fourth Hand* (2001), also set in India, dealt with a photojournalist who loses his hand in an accident and receives the first hand transplant. *Until I Find You* (2004) concerns a successful actor who spent his childhood looking for his church organist father in the tattoo parlors of Northern Europe.

Throughout his work Irving has expressed a warm affection for humanity in all its variety and a deep admiration for the courage and humor of all people who confront the cruelties and catastrophes of life. Although his first marriage ended in 1981, he married his literary agent, Janet Turnbull, in 1987 and began a second family. Today he and his family live in Vermont and Toronto; he continues to write novels and adapt his previous works for motion pictures.

<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/irvObio-1>

THE ADAPTER: SIMON BENT

Mr. Bent studied drama at Birmingham University and started his theatrical career as an actor. As writer-in-residence at the University of Essex, he wrote *Evacuees* for Spectrum Theatre, Cambridge. His work includes *Knuckle Butty*, *Wigan Kiss*, *Full Fathom Five*, *The Blood of Others*, *Goldhawk Road*, *Shelter*, *Bad Company*, *Wasted*, *Sugar Sugar* and *Accomplices*.

www.amazon.com

RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES IN AMERICA, 1953-1970

OWEN: *For a Congregationalist like you to turn Episcopalian it's nothing; just a move upward in church formality, in hocus pocus — but for a Catholic like me it's a move away from the hocus pocus and you run the risk of eternal damnation.*

— A Prayer for Owen Meany

By the middle of the 20th century Americans were growing confused about the number of religions around them. John Wheelwright was a member of this group as he was baptized a Congregationalist, confirmed as an Episcopalian and finally became an Anglican with a “church rummage faith—the kind that needs patching up every weekend.”¹ American Protestants were dealing with the presence of Jews, Catholics and other faiths in the United States and began to reconsider their missionary efforts. A special commission appraised the mission movement and concluded: “American Protestants (had) to be more sensitive to other cultures and other religions.”² But the common ground among Jews, Catholics and Protestants expanded into the world of popular theology during the 1950s largely as a result of three books—*The Power of Positive Thinking* by Norman Vincent Peale; *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* by Will Herberg, and *Peace of Mind* by Rabbi Joshua Liebman. All offered a kind of feel-good theology for Americans. Peale’s work promised readers they could feel better about themselves and meet the challenges of postwar Communism if they “adopted a sunny, can-do disposition and invoked the help of a Judeo-Christian God.”³ Herberg, a theologian at Drew University concluded that Protestantism,

Catholicism and Judaism were the three great American religions, “the religions of democracy.”⁴

American Catholics managed to create a unified church out of diverse populations, the Irish, the German, the Italian and Latino. Catholic schools played a critical role in allowing their students to feel comfortable in American society; their standards were high and their graduates went on to universities where they could excel.

As middle class Americans grew more prosperous and moved to the suburbs, they felt that belief in God and some kind of religious affiliation “were essential ammunition in the Cold War that the United States was waging against the Soviet Union.”⁵ In 1954 Congress even added the words “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance, so that the United States became “one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

Religion played a central role in the 1960 Presidential election and brought Catholics into the American mainstream. The Democratic candidate, John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts, was bright, charming, articulate, young—and Catholic. He assured American voters he was not obliged to obey the Pope and “was dedicated to the separation of church and state and to the preservation of religious liberty.”⁶ When Kennedy was elected President, he meant to lead the country into a “New Frontier” that included an emphasis on science and technology. In 1961 he gave Congress the goal of a manned landing on the moon before the end of the 1960s.

In 1962 Pope John XXIII called for the Second Vatican Council or Vatican II. The Council urged reforms in the nature of church authority, in the

conduct of the mass and in extending a hand to non-Catholics. This movement brought a burst of energy to American Catholics who were now free to experiment with new forms of worship. The laity assumed a larger role in church affairs, from the formation of parish councils and advisory boards to assistance at the mass.

In the mid 1960s some individuals began to doubt the existence of God; the “death of God” theology represented a departure from the old religious systems and an embrace of a new kind of self-sufficiency. John Wheelwright harbors this feeling when he says to Owen: “You died, God died and nothing is certain.”⁷ *Time* magazine placed the matter in the starkest terms with a 1966 cover—that asked: “Is God Dead?”⁸

The 1960s ended with national disillusionment. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963 and five years later his brother, Robert, and Martin Luther King Jr. There were riots in the streets of Newark, Detroit and Los Angeles and protests against the war in Vietnam. “The promise of scientific and

technological advances were being squandered on weapons of destruction as the United States and the Soviet Union continued to regard each other with wary eyes.”⁹ As the 1970s dawned, Christian traditions were being reshaped by the upheaval of the previous decade.

1. Reilly, p. 126
 2. Butler, Wacker, Balmer, p. 305.
 3. Ibid, p. 367.
 - 4 Ibid, p. 367.
 5. Ibid, p. 374.
 6. Ibid, p. 386.
 7. *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, by John Irving, adapted by Simon Bent. Page 58.
 8. Butler, Wacker, Balmer, p. 388.
 9. Ibid, p. 402.
- Butler, Jon; Wacker, Grant, and Balmer, Randall. *Religion in American Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Reilly, Edward C. *Understanding John Irving*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 1991.
- www.nhc.rtp.nc.us.

THEMES IN *A Prayer for Owen Meany*

Faith and religion are major themes that run through the play. The religious symbolism focuses on Owen: his mysterious conception and birth, his stature, his voice and the way he touches people and they, in turn, want to touch him. Owen makes prophetic announcements such as the revelation of John’s father and the date of his own death.

The theme of faith versus doubt is prominent throughout the play. Owen has absolute faith in God and seems to have possessed it from an early age. He never doubts that there is a purpose to everything and his faith in his own destiny never wavers. In contrast, John has no particular religious beliefs but is possessed by doubts—about his father, and about his own identity. Reverend Merrill represents the difficulty of having faith in the 20th century. Although a clergyman, for him doubt is the essence of faith. He believes that it is natural to be skeptical about a world, which presents little evidence of the existence of God. Both he and John demand logical proof of miracles and seek

answers to unanswerable questions. As Francis Bacon wrote: “If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he will end in certainties.”¹

The theme of faith is linked to one of fate and destiny. As written, Owen believes there is reason for everything, including his peculiar, high-pitched voice. “The belief that everything exists for a purpose, as part of a preordained pattern, raises the question of free will.”² If all events are predestined, can human beings exercise free choice? John asks himself this question when Owen sees the date of his death on the gravestone in a performance of *A Christmas Carol*. The question of how a loving God can permit evil events to happen such as Tabitha’s death and the Vietnam War is one John poses but never answers.

The political issues of the Vietnam War are a major theme of the play. Both Owen and John have draft cards with forged birthdays, useful for purchasing liquor, but neither one knows much about Vietnam. Later on, John recites the names of

battles (the Tet Offensive, Operation Rolling Thunder, Operation Paul Revere) and remembers the body count. But Owen enlists and is made a casualty assistance officer, an escort to the remains of those who were killed in the war. It is not until he confronts the wretched Jarvits family that he criticizes U.S. foreign policy and the war.

1. Bacon, v, 8.
2. Gale Group, p. 10.

<http://0-galegroup.com/> *Novels for Students, Vol. 14*. Detroit: Gale Group, 2002.
Bacon, Francis. *Advancement of Learning I*, v, 8, 1605.
Bent, Simon (adapter). *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. London: Oberon Books, 2002.
Campbell, Josie P. *John Irving: a Critical Companion*. London: Greenwood Press, 1998.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE VIETNAM WAR

Between 1945 and 1954, the Vietnamese waged an anti-colonial war against France, that received \$2.6 billion in financial support from the United States. The French defeat at Dien Bien Phu was followed by a peace conference in Geneva. Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam received their independence and Vietnam was temporarily divided between an anti-Communist South and a Communist North. In 1956, South Vietnam, with American backing, refused to hold unification elections. By 1958, Communist-led guerillas known as the Viet Cong began to battle the South Vietnamese government forces. To support the South's government, the United States sent in 2000 military advisors, a number that grew to 16,300 by 1963. The military condition steadily deteriorated and by 1963 South Vietnam had lost the fertile Mekong Delta to the Viet Cong.

In 1964, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution which gave the President unlimited authorization to conduct war in Southeast Asia. In 1965 President Lyndon B. Johnson, who had campaigned as an anti-war candidate, escalated the war, commencing air strikes on North Vietnam (Operation Rolling Thunder) and committing ground forces, which numbered 538,000 in 1968. The 1968 Tet Offensive which began with an attack on the United States Embassy in Saigon by the Viet Cong took U.S. Command by surprise. Its strength, length and intensity prolonged the war and turned

many Americans against it.

The next president, Richard Nixon, advocated Vietnamization which meant the withdrawing of American forces and giving South Vietnam greater responsibility for fighting the war. His attempt to slow the flow of North Vietnamese soldiers and supplies into South Vietnam sent American soldiers into Cambodia to destroy Communist supply bases in 1970. This action was in violation of Cambodian neutrality and provoked severe antiwar protests on the nation's college campuses.

From 1968 to 1973 efforts were made to end the conflict through diplomacy. In January 1973, an agreement was reached and U. S. forces were withdrawn from Vietnam and U.S. prisoners of war were released. In April 1975, South Vietnam surrendered to the North and Vietnam was reunited.

The toll of the conflict was painful for everyone. The war cost the United States 58,000 lives and 350,000 casualties. Between one and two million Vietnamese were killed.

<http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu>.

Gettleman, Marvin E.; Franklin, Jane; Young, Marilyn B. and Franklin, H. Bruce. *Vietnam and America*. New York: Grove Press, 1995.

VIETNAM AND THE PROTEST MOVEMENT

JOHN: *We wanted peace, we wanted it now, we were against the war, and Owen joined the army.*

—A Prayer for Owen Meany

When the Vietnam war started only a small percentage of the American population opposed the war. But as it continued, the opposition grew to include the lower-income classes, blue-collar workers and African Americans. These were the people who were ultimately drafted and did the dirty work of fighting the conflict.

The first march to Washington against the war took place in December 1964. A then obscure organization called the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) issued the call for individuals to travel to the nation's capital. Only a few thousand were expected, but 25,000 people showed up, dressed neatly in jackets, ties or skirts. The demonstrations continued on an even larger scale. By 1967, 300,000 to 500,000 people joined a march in New York. In 1971 an estimated half million converged on Washington, D.C.

As the war continued, more and more Americans turned against it. People were particularly upset by the use of chemical weapons such as napalm and Agent Orange. In 1967 a group of distinguished academics under the leadership of philosopher Bertrand Russell and writer Jean Paul Sartre established the International War Crimes Tribunal. After interviewing many witnesses, the Tribunal concluded that the United States was guilty of using weapons against the Vietnamese that were prohibited by international law. The U.S. armed forces were also found guilty of torturing captured prisoners and innocent civilians.

In November 1965, moral outrage was taken to its ultimate when Norman Morrison, a Quaker from Baltimore, followed the example of the Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Due, and publicly burnt himself to death. In the weeks that were to follow, two other pacifists, Roger La Porte and Alice Herz, also immolated themselves in protest against the war.

The decision to introduce conscription for the war increased the level of protest, especially among

young men. To keep the support of the articulate and influential members of the middle class, students were not called up. However, students throughout America still protested what they considered an attack on people's rights to decide for themselves whether or not they wanted to fight for the country.

Anti-draft resistance became a significant national movement in 1967. On April 15, 1967, 150 young men burned their draft cards at a rally in New York City. "The same day in San Francisco a new organization called the Resistance announced in 'We Refuse' a national draft card turn-in to be held in October."¹

As the war continued, demonstrations increased while public opinion polls showed only narrow support for further involvement in Vietnam. President Lyndon Johnson realized that if the war persevered, he would be forced to extend the draft to college students. When that happened, he would have great difficulty maintaining any support for the war.

On April 4, 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. distanced himself from the Johnson administration when he gave a speech entitled "Declaration of Independence from the War in Vietnam." This speech by the recipient of the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1964 had a "profound influence, strengthening anti-war consciousness and activity everywhere, from churches and colleges to the streets of the ghettos and the ranks of GIs in Vietnam."²

The dwindling support for the war and resistance to the draft posed problems for the government. A number of draft evaders and resisters began to leave the United States for such places as France, Germany, Sweden, Canada, the Netherlands and England. These "deserters" tended to embarrass our government by organizing anti-war demonstrations in other countries and by building an underground organization in western Europe whose activities included leafleting U.S. military bases.

As the conflict escalated, "the morale, discipline and battle worthiness of the U.S. Armed Forces became lower and worse than at any time in this century."³ There was drug addiction, racial war, sedition, barrack theft and common crime, all

ignored by senior officers and Congress. The field soldiers felt they were “in a nightmare war that [was] foisted on them by bright civilians who were now back on [college] campuses writing books about the folly of it all.”⁴ The Army’s public image fell to a low point. On March 31, 1968, President Lyndon Johnson announced the curtailment of the bombing of North Vietnam and his decision not to seek re-election. This speech is often considered the beginning of the end of America’s war in Vietnam.

1. Gettleman, Franklin, Young, Franklin, p. 306.
2. Ibid, p. 310.
3. Ibid, p. 327.
4. Ibid, p. 328.

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk>.

Gettleman, Marvin E.: Franklin, Jane; Young, Marilyn B., and Franklin, H. Bruce. *Vietnam and America*. New York: Grove Press, 1995.

VIRGIN BIRTH

MR. MEANY: *She just conceived a child. I am not Owen’s father. That was the first outrage.*
—A Prayer for Owen Meany

Jesus was not the first virgin birth in history. “The idea of a Virgin-Mother Goddess is practically universal,” writes J. M. Robertson in his book, *Christianity and Mythology*.¹ He cites several examples from around the world. The Mexican Hiutzilopochtli was impregnated by a touch of a ball of feathers; Hera gave birth to Ares from the touch of a flower; Goddess Hina in Tahiti conceived Oro by the shadow of a bread-fruit leaf, and in India Buddha was born of a Virgin.

The Hindus borrowed from Egypt before Christianity was ever heard of. The idea of virgin birth may have been derived from the goddess Isis giving birth to Horus. At any rate, 2000 years before Christ, it is recorded that Mut-em-wa, virgin queen of Egypt, gave birth to Pharaoh Amenkopt (Amenophis III) who built the temple at Luxor.

“From virgin earth mothers it was only a step to virgin human mothers,” writes Lloyd Graham. Alexander the Great was said to be the offspring of a god who, disguised as a serpent, beguiled his mother Olympias. Plato was the alleged son of Apollo, who in the form of a bull, embraced the virgin Perictione.

The reverence for virginity was attributed to the fact that they could make the fields fertile. The sacrifice of chastity in the service of a god or goddess was thought to be an act of devotion. The Vestal Virgins in Rome were gifted with the faculty of prophecy and enjoyed many privileges as long as they maintained their chastity.

1. Robertson, p. 171.

Graham, Lloyd. *Deception and Myths of the Bible*. New York: Bell Publishing Co., 1979.

Robertson, John M. *Christianity and Mythology*. London: Watts and Co., 1936.

OWEN AS A CHRIST FIGURE

OWEN: *Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.*
—A Prayer for Owen Meany

A literary Christ figure displays the characteristics of Christ as depicted in the Bible, such as the performance of miracles, the healing of others, the fight for justice and the spirit of love and kindness. In Owen's case, he is a Christ figure because he sacrifices his life to save others.

Other Christ figures in literature include Aslan in *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis. He sacrifices himself to save Edmond from the White Witch. Simba in *The Lion King* leaves the pride, then returns to become the king and save the lions from destruction all under the spiritual guidance of his father, Mufasa. Gandolf in *Lord of the Rings* fulfills the Messianic role of Prophet; after proclaiming the danger of the tempting One Ring, he helps form and leads the disciples of the Fellowship of the Ring.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_figure

[http://o-go.galegroup/Novels for Students Vol. 14](http://o-go.galegroup/Novels_for_Students_Vol.14). Detroit: Gale Press, 2002.

CHRIST, HITLER AND JUNG

RANDY WHITE: *I have always maintained the three most important men in history are Jesus Christ, Adolph Hitler and Carl Gustav Jung. Good and evil, reverse sides of the same coin; Christ and the anti-Christ, and the collective unconscious.*
—A Prayer for Owen Meany

Jesus Christ was the founder of the Christian religion; Christians believe that He was the Son of God sent to earth to save mankind. He probably influenced humanity more than anyone else who ever lived.

The name Jesus in Hebrew means "Savior, or help of the Lord." His followers called Him the Messiah, or anointed of the Lord. The name Christ comes from the Greek word "Christos" which means anointed one.

The teachings of Christ united people from many parts of the world into a great religious movement. Democratic beliefs in equality, responsibility and care for the weak owe much to Jesus' teachings of brotherhood and love.

Adolph Hitler (1889-1945) ruled Germany as a dictator from 1933 to 1945. He is recognized as one of the most evil men in history. He turned Germany into a powerful war machine and began World War II in 1939. He conquered most of Europe and killed six million Jews before Germany was defeated in 1945.

Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) was a Swiss psychiatrist, an influential thinker and the founder of analytical psychology. Jung's approach to psychology has been influential in the field of depth analysis. He emphasized understanding the psyche through exploring the worlds of dreams, art, mythology, world religions and philosophy. His most notable ideas included the concept of psychological archetypes and the collective unconscious, which is a repository of all the religious, spiritual and mythological symbols and experiences.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl_Jung

World Book Encyclopedia. Chicago: Field Enterprises Educational Corporation, 1972.

SMALL TOWN NEW ENGLAND LIFE

The small town energy (is) evidenced in the play with everyone knowing everyone else, with criticism and acceptance rolled together.

— Design Conference Notes, p. 3.

“Gravesend, on the surface, is a bucolic New England town, but beneath the surface, the town is deeply divided by class,” writes Josie P. Campbell in her study of John Irving.¹ The Meanys are blue-collar granite quarriers while the Wheelwrights are the town’s most prominent family. John’s grandmother is a descendant of the Mayflower contingent.

In addition, the town is a “place of innocuous, undemanding religion.”² Reverend Merrill and his Congregationalists require little in the way of participation or belief while the Episcopalian rector, Mr. Wiggins, is a master of boredom. Both serve as a contrast to Owen’s fervent demanding faith. The name Gravesend also points to “the religious theme of death and resurrection that runs through the novel. Is the grave the end or is religious faith the end of the grave?”³

New England literature about small towns does not dwell much on the past. Who your family is plays an important role, but people know their place in society. “Getting on with it without much angst is the way to behave in New England.”⁴ If a family has lived in the same community for years like the Wheelwrights, everyone already knows their business, so there is no need to speak of it.

In a blog about life in a small New England town, “Kathy likes Pink” lists her likes and dislikes about life there. She loves: “1. knowing almost everybody in town; 2. the fact that the high school doesn’t have locks on student lockers; and 3. having one homeless person whose name is Charley who does not want anybody’s help.” She definitely does not like: “1: everybody in town knowing every member of your family; 2. never being able to flip anyone off in traffic; 3. being pulled over for speeding by one of the three patrol cars, and 4. having to complete errands by noon on Saturday because all the shops close.”⁵

1. Campbell, p. 131.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. www.mis.lib.il.us

5. <http://kathylikespink>

http://www.mis.lib.il.us/consulting/new_england.asp

http://kathylikespink.blogspot.com/2008/03life_in_small_new-england-town

Campbell, Josie P. *John Irving: a Critical Companion*. London: Greenwood Press, 1998.

Denver Center for the Performing Arts. *A Prayer for Owen Meany Design Conference Notes*. Denver: September 2008.

OWEN MEANY QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Questions

- 1) Explain the central theme in *A Prayer for Owen Meany*.
- 2) What is the significance of the two plays-within-the-play; *A Christmas Carol* and the Christmas Pageant?
- 3) This play is set from the early 1950s and to the late 1960s. What are the similarities with today's world?
- 4) Describe the similarities and differences between the families of the Wheelwrights, Meanys and Jarvits.
- 5) Why does Owen believe he is an instrument of God? Explain why you agree or disagree with his opinion? What is your opinion of fate?
- 6) Define faith.
- 7) Why did Owen's family stop going to church?
- 8) John and Owen have a difference in opinion about the Vietnam War. Why do you think Owen felt it necessary to enlist in the army? How do the other characters feel about the war?
- 9) Why does Tabitha keep the identity of John's father a mystery?
- 10) How do the Grandmother's feelings for Owen change through the play?
- 11) How would the play differ if the story was told from Owen's point of view? Or from another character's view?

Activities

Adaptation –Stage to Page

- 1) Start by picking a scene from the play *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. After reading the scene, find the key themes and character choices.
- 2) From this scene, transform what transpires on stage into a couple of paragraphs describing what happens and what the characters do actively on the stage.
- 3) Once the first draft is written, find some areas that you can embellish. Look for moments where you can embellish what each character is feeling or thinking in your adaptation.
- 4) Discuss how it was to adapt from the play to the other. What were some of the obstacles that you faced? Keep in mind that the playwright had adapted the play from a novel.

Colorado Model Content Standards

Reading and Writing 1: Students read and understand a variety of materials.

Reading and Writing 2: Students write and speak for a variety of purposes and audiences.

Adaptation – Page to Stage

- 1) Start by picking a passage from the novel *A Prayer for Owen Meany* by John Irving to adapt for the stage.
- 2) From the passage, change what happens on the written page into a script for a play. Pay close attention to the dialogue and the action in the passage.
- 3) After writing the first draft, cast the scene and have the students read the scenes that they have written.
- 4) Discuss the differences between the novel and scenes. What did the authors do to convey the characters and plot? Did they have to invent, delete, or change anything to communicate the story?
- 5) After seeing the production, what did the adaptor, Simon Bent, modify to tell his version of the story? What were the differences between Bent's play and the scenes that were written in class?

Colorado Model Content Standards

Reading and Writing 1: Students read and understand a variety of materials.

Reading and Writing 2: Students write and speak for a variety of purposes and audiences.

Character Switch

Owen Meany has many strong attributes. However, his peers seem to think of him as rather strange and an outcast. Compile a list of traits and attributes that make up the character of Owen from his point of view. For example, Owen is articulate and courageous. Then, compile a list of how the other characters perceive him. For example, he is arrogant and has a grating voice. How does the actor's portrayal change if you use the list of the other character's perception? Take some other characters from the play and create the two lists and see how they differ.

From your own life or from the world, take a few people you admire and compile a list of their traits and attributes. Why do you think that they are this way? What would happen if you change some of these attributes into a negative characteristic? How would your perception change?

Colorado Model Content Standard

Reading and Writing 6: Students read and recognize literature as a record of human experience.