

# The cowardice of popularity: johnny's character



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In John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, protagonist Johnny experiences outward conformity while inwardly questioning throughout the duration of his entire life. An exemplar of cowardice, Johnny uses passive aggression and the voices of others to disguise his inability to take a stand. The tendency of Johnny to silently question while taking no action creates the trait of cowardice that dominates his character throughout the entirety of the novel.

It is said that "actions, not words, create change". Johnny, although inwardly critical of the Vietnam War, not only took no actions to create a change, but was not even vocal or expressive about his feelings. In a time dominated by protests, rallies, and demonstrations, Johnny could not even bring himself to voice his disdain for the war, expressing that "even when the Anglicans asked me what I thought of Prime Minister Pearson's "old point of view".... I actually said I agreed! Even though- as I've admitted- I'd never met a harsh deserter, not one" (463). The generation of the Vietnam soldiers, upon return to America, worked to create an America that supported and listened to those who had, previously, not been listened to. Arizona Senator John McCain is just one example. McCain, unsatisfied with the war and the treatment of those who served, ran for office to combat these issues with more productive policy. Johnny never shared his opinion, let alone took action to combat the problems in society that he saw. Because Johnny was inwardly critical of the Vietnam War, but did not take any actions to create change, he was a coward.

Prior to the Vietnam War, Johnny conformed to agree with his classmates within the Academy, leaving the questioning to Owen and The Voice. "I did, or tried to do, everything Owen did" (287), said Johnny, dependent on Owen

to be outspoken due to his inability to use language and speak well. As Johnny struggled throughout his educational career to succeed in English, reading, and writing, he was willing to give Owen the power to speak on his behalf. “ The Voice was our voice; he championed our causes; he made us proud of ourselves in an atmosphere that belittled and intimidated us” (295). Johnny was dependent on Owen to vocally question events and standards, even though Johnny shared the same criticisms and questions Owen did about society. Johnny was too much of a coward and simply lacked the confidence and ability to say so. He settled for conformity, never voicing his true feelings. Thus, the inward criticism and outward conformity spurred from his dependence on Owen and struggle in English and made Johnny a coward.

Johnny is also a coward because he cared more about impressing people than standing up for his own beliefs. This standard led him to a life of inward criticism, and outward conformity. “ I never actually said— to any of my Canadian friends— that I suspected these deserters were no more likely to become “ public charges” than I was likely to become such a charge. By then, Canon Campbell has introduced me to old Teddybear Kilgore, who had hired me to teach at Bishop Strachan. We Wheelwrights have always benefited from our connections” (463). While working in a church and dedicating his life to teaching both English and the value of Christ, Johnny preaches morality and Christian superiority. However, this message conflicts with his actions as he inwardly criticized the war that represented the opposite of morality, while outwardly conforming in his words of support. Johnny placed more value on his societal status and networking abilities,

thus hindering his ability to stand up for what is right, even if it means standing alone, leading to a lifetime of conformity.

Johnny's interpretation of history and political issues showcases his cowardice. " When some of the Grace Church on-the Hill Anglicans asked me what I thought of Prime Minister Pearson's " old point of view"— that the deserters (as opposed to the war resisters) were in a category of U. S. citizens to be discouraged from coming to Canada- I actually said I agreed! Even though- as I've admitted - I'd never met a harsh deserter, not one" (463). The " Church on-the Hill Anglicans" is a reference to John Winthrop's speech, A City on a Hill, from the founding and settlement of Massachusetts Bay Colony. Winthrop said that " America was to be a City on a Hill", a model of superiority and moral purity. The phrase was used by both Presidents Kennedy and Reagan in major speeches. Johnny does not hide his love for Kennedy and despise for Reagan; his views strongly reflect the environments in which he was in- the popular opinion of the Academy strongly favored Kennedy, while the views of Canada in his time there did not support Reagan because of America's involvement in Vietnam. The fact that both men had the same outlook on America shows Johnny's cowardice as he is unable to go against what is popular and accepted in his environment. Johnny is a product of his environment as he cherry picks who he will criticize and who he will admire, thrusting him into a cycle of outward conformity.

Over the course of his life, Johnny conformed to be like those surrounding him, while questioning society inwardly. A lifetime of silent protest and dependence on those around him to voice their opinions and teach him what

to think caused him to be a coward and unable to form and voice his own opinions.