

"the little lord jesus":
the existence of
higher powers in a
prayer for owen
mean...



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In a Prayer for Owen Meany the relationship between religion and faith is often contradictory to societal beliefs causing confusion. Johnny's questioning of organized religion and his growing faith creates a tension. The last chapter of the novel reconciles the tension through the parallelism that occurs between Owen and religious, supernatural imagery, indicating that faith and religion are not necessarily linked. Thus the novel suggests that the existence of higher powers is dependent on an individual's perceptions, not traditional norms.

Throughout the span of Johnny's life, the contrast between his struggle to find truth in religion and his increasing faith in his best friend, Owen Meany, illustrates the inner battle Johnny faces while determining what he believes in. The novel begins with Johnny criticizing religion claiming, " every study of the gods, of everyone's gods, is a revelation of vengeance toward the innocent" (9). The use of " study" brings to question the difference between religion and faith, as in the passage religion is something to be studied, faith is something to believe in. Johnny is questioning the validity of organized religion, as he sees it as more corrupt than beneficial. His uncertainty towards Christianity is apparent throughout the novel as he questions the practice of religious figures between various branches of Christianity. The act of deciding his favorite practice of religion puts a strain on Johnny's faith, which Owen analyzes by saying that " BELIEF IS NOT AN INTELLECTUAL MATTER" (115). Comparable to Irving's use of " study" in the previous passage, " intellectual" suggests that using analytical thought, in regard to faith, dismisses its strength.

In youth, religion played a larger role in Johnny's life than faith, which is contrasted in adulthood, after Owen's death, when " a small, strong hand (or something like a small, strong hand) guided [his] own hand to the light switch; a small, strong hand, or something like it, pulled [him] forward from where [he] teetered on the top step of the stairs. And his voice—it was unmistakably Owen's voice—said: ' DON'T BE AFRAID. NOTHING BAD IS GOING TO HAPPEN TO YOU'" (526). The repetition emphasizes the implication, even before it's outright said, that Owen is helping Johnny from beyond the grave. The italicized text indicates the bewilderment Johnny must have felt in the moment, and further it signifies how much he truly believes Owen saved him. The miracle of Owen coming back to Johnny from death perpetuates his faith in Owen as a godly force. Much more than a boy or childhood friend, Owen is a miracle, someone to look up to—God. The belief in faith that Owen instilled within Johnny cascades into his adult life when he found that "[he] was more of an Anglican than [he] ever was a Congregationalist or an Episcopalian—or even a nondenominational, Hurd's Church whatever-[he]-was. [He] was a participant at Grace Church on-the-Hill in a way that [he] had never been a participant before" (465). Before Owen's death Johnny's experience with religion had been inconsistent, having switched branches of Christianity as a child, critiquing the authority and practice in Church. It's only after Owen's death does Johnny start strongly identifying as a Christian, because he believes in the miracle that was Owen. The emphasis on word choice in the passage signifies the different stages of Johnny's life, suggesting the last is most meaningful, as he's participating actively, making his own deliberate choices about faith.

Johnny defines Christianity for himself when he disregards traditional norms
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and allows himself to believe in the person he has always been faithful in, demonstrating how higher powers do not have to take traditional forms.

The parallelism between Owen and religious, supernatural imagery reconciles the tension between faith and religion, exhibiting how faith and traditional perceptions of religion can be two separate entities, further suggesting that the existence of godly figures is dependent on a person's faith. As a boy Owen's peculiar physical characteristics are often drawn attention to for the purpose of displaying his physical weakness. The irony throughout the novel, however, is that despite his small stature Owen has great spiritual power, demonstrated in the context of religious imagery as when " he looked like a descending angel—a tiny but fiery god, sent to adjudicate the errors of our ways" (72). The heavenly imagery associated with Owen is suggestive that he is more than human and that he possesses some form of holy power. Owen and Jesus are analogous through adjudication, as Jesus was asked to adjudicate sins, indicating that Owen has the same purpose. His physical characteristics represent him as a religious figure as do the way he is perceived figuratively: " The editorial and the subsequent weekly essays that Owen published in The Grave were ascribed not to Owen Meany by name, but to " The Voice"; and the text was printed in uniform upper-case letters" (293). The parallelism between Owen Meany and Jesus Christ is shown through the way Owen is portrayed at his school newspaper. He's referred to as " The Voice" with a capital V that is similar to how God is capitalized, as He. Similarly Owen and Jesus both have distinct forms of recognition in terms of their writing. In the Bible Jesus's words are distinguished by red text, comparable to Owen's capitalized writing in the

paper (and his dialogue). The similarities in style and recognition indicate that Owen is as transcendent and important to his following (his community at Gravesend) as Jesus was to Christians.

Furthermore Owen's presence, although physically small, carried great weight among his community. Often a leader, his voice is prevalent as is the light imagery that he is associated with, seen at the end of the novel when "the sun had set, vivid streaks of vermilion-colored light traced the enormous sky, and through one of these streaks of light [Johnny] saw Owen's plane descending—as if, wherever Owen Meany went, some kind of light always attended him" (607). The imagery associated with Owen describes him as a figure followed by a constant presence of light: a supernatural, heavenly characteristic. Light is often implicit of positivity and purity, characteristics reminiscent of angels and holy figures. Moreover, the most explicit comparison of Owen to Jesus is the Meanys' suggestion that Owen is the product of a "virgin birth" (549). While many find the notion preposterous, the implication of it suggests that Owen, like Jesus, was born fated for a sacrificial cause. The parallelism between Owen and Jesus resolve Johnny's contradictory feelings about organized religion and faith, because he no longer has to decide which takes the more prevalent role in his life. Johnny's redefinition of Christianity, through means of Owen, exhibits the flexibility of faith and religion, showing that, although separate entities, they can coexist; in Johnny's case his religion is dependent on his faith in Owen.

The tension between Johnny's questioning of religion throughout the novel and his growing faith is reconciled by the parallelism that occurs between

Owen and religious imagery in the last chapter of the novel, which indicates <https://assignbuster.com/the-little-lord-jesus-the-existence-of-higher-powers-in-a-prayer-for-owen-meany/>

that faith and religion are not necessarily linked. The contradicting forces of spirituality, religion and faith, have been tearing at Johnny his entire life. It was not until Johnny was able to define how religion would play in his life, through the means of fate, that he was able to have confidence in his spiritual identity. By allowing Owen to be the higher power in his life Johnny proves that the existence of higher powers do not have to depend on societal norms, but rather an individual's beliefs.