

Owen's struggle with temptation



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Owen Meany is a character who commands attention, not only because of his small stature and high-pitched voice, but also because of his blind and undying faith in God. Yet, even with his God-like qualities, Owen's attraction to John's mother, Tabitha, and cousin, Hester, continue to make Owen human, despite his belief that he is an instrument of God. In John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, the similarities between Tabitha and Hester represent Owen's lifelong battle with temptation.

One major similarity between Tabitha and Hester is the fact that they are both important parts of John's life. In some ways, they represent the underlying jealousy that Owen has for Johnny. Owen, although he has two parents, is not nearly as loved as Johnny is by his mother. Because of this, Owen is constantly craving the attention of Tabitha who mothers him the way he never is by his own parents. Owen's selfishness when it comes to Tabitha is seen later on when he refuses to part with the dummy that had belonged to her before she died. Similarly, Owen also experiences jealousy towards Johnny's relationship with his cousins, who he frequently visits at Sawyer Depot. This can be seen in the lines, "Owen was extremely irritable regarding the time I spent with my cousins...I thought he was jealous" (60). Owen and Hester's relationship later on continues to leave Johnny isolated, as Owen often spends the night at her apartment rather than with him. Owen's selfishness when it comes to Tabitha and Hester represent a human side to him unlike his usual purity and almost god-like manner.

Aside from being major parts of Johnny's life, the two women are also similar in that they are both very attractive. Tabitha is often described as beautiful which can be seen in the lines, "Tabby Wheelwright looked like a starlet—

lush, whimsical, easy to talk into anything" (38). Owen himself admits to finding Johnny's mother attractive on several occasions. Often compared to a feline, Tabitha is not only beautiful, but manipulative as well. While she never purposely manipulates other people, they seem to be almost mesmerized by her charm. Her subtle ability to control people can be seen in the lines, " She had such a sweet-tempered disposition, it was impossible to stay angry with her. She never appeared to be as assertive as she was" (15). In a way, Owen accidentally killing her represented his attempt to escape from his temptation. However, this is never truly achieved because of his lust for Hester later on. Like Tabitha, Hester is also very attractive. Even at a young age, Hester seems to radiate a sense of sexuality that gives her the nickname " Hester the Molester." She contrasts Owen in that unlike his unrelenting child-like appearance, she appears to be an overly mature girl even as a child. Both Johnny and Owen find her very attractive and both lust for her. Because she is so aware of the affect she has on men, she is able to manipulate others in a way that is reminiscent of Tabitha's subtle manipulation. The two women continue to draw out the sexual desires in Owen throughout his life.

Another similarity between Hester and Tabitha is that they are both involved in a scandal. Johnny's mother is often criticized for having a child before she is married. The fact that the father turns out to be Reverend Merrill represents an even bigger scandal in that it is as if Tabitha had seduced one of God's workers. This can be seen again in the way Owen, who thinks of himself as an instrument of God, seemed to lust for her as well. His acknowledgement of her attractiveness is seen when he says, " Your mother

is so sexy, I keep forgetting she's anyone's mother" (38). In one incident, Owen goes into Tabitha's room and falls asleep in her bed, an action that represents his lust for her as well as her willingness to allow it. Although she remains a conservative and modest character throughout the novel, her scandalous past continues to come back up. Yet despite Tabitha's illegitimate pregnancy, the most scandalous character of the novel is Hester. Even at a young age, she is suspected of having sexual encounters with many men, which can be seen when it is said, "Hester was in much need of rescuing from the wildness within her" (265). Later on when she and Owen are suspected of seeing each other, Johnny continues to wonder whether or not they ever sleep together.

The mystery and scandal that surround each woman represent the temptation that Owen continues to struggle with throughout his life. In *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, Owen's struggle to remain sinless is often tempted by his lust for the characters of Tabitha and Hester. They help Irving to cast Owen's battle with temptation in a particularly stark light, and to alert the reader to one of the most important complexities of the apparently principled Owen's narrative.