

Arms and hands:
symbols of power,
faith, and doubt in a
prayer for Owen
Meany



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BUSTER**

In many religions, arms and hands are regarded as symbols of divine power and expression. Author John Irving uses this tradition in *A Prayer for Owen Meany* to illustrate Owen's power and portray Owen as a deity. *A Prayer for Owen Meany* tells the story of two best friends growing up, and how one's religious devoutness influences the other into late adulthood. Owen is sure of his faith throughout his life, and as a young adult believes he is the 'Christ Child'. His belief stems from his supernatural ability to see the future, to sense death, and his birth from a 'virgin' mother. John, his best friend, struggles with his faith and identity throughout his life and is greatly influenced by Owen and his actions, beliefs, and powers. Arms and hands are motifs in the novel that add depth to the meaning of the story.

Arms are often used in religion to symbolize a deity's power, which is illustrated in Irving's novel; the armadillo, dressmaker's dummy, and Mary Magdalene are symbols used to depict the ways in which Owen receives power from God. In Christianity, the power of God is written in the Bible as "the arm of God". According to the Rev. Edward Craig Mitchell in *Scripture Symbolism: An Introduction to the Science of Correspondences, Or Natural and Spiritual Counterparts*, "The arm of Jehovah signifies the Divine Power. In a special sense, the arm of Jehovah is the Divine Humanity, assumed in ultimates, or externals, in Jesus Christ," (Mitchell, 165). At the end of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, when Owen saves a dozen children from death, it is his arms, and the arms of Johnny, that propel him into the ceiling to throw out the grenade. Thus, it is his arms which emphasize his power as a hero, and which consummate the theory that Owen's power to see the future is a trait of his divinity. This incident leaves him armless, symbolizing that as he

dies God is relieving Owen of his duties as “ His instrument”, and that Owen has lost purpose for life. Throughout the novel, armless figures are used to symbolize that God has dismembered someone in order to express His will. After he kills Johnny’s mother, Owen and Johnny take part in a sort of exchange of offerings, in which Owen takes the claws of a stuffed armadillo both boys hold sacred. The taking of the ‘ arms’ of the armadillo represents that it was not Owen’s hands which killed Tabby Wheelwright, but God’s. This notion is expressed also in the “ Angel of Death” that comes for Tabby. When Owen walks into her bedroom and sees the armless dressmaker’s dummy, he believes it to be the Angel of Death. He says, “ THAT ANGEL WAS VERY BUSY- SHE WAS MOVING, ALWAYS MOVING. ESPECIALLY HER HANDS- SHE KEPT REACHING OUT WITH HER HANDS.” (450). That night, Owen had ‘ taken’ the arms/hands of the dressmaker’s dummy and assumed its role as the Angel of Death. After he kills Tabby, this becomes evident to him, and he realizes that he is the hand of God. Further, at Gravesend Academy Owen is expelled because of his illegal copying of draft cards and contentious relationship with the administration. In protest he mutilates the statue of Mary Magdalene. By removing her arms and placing her in sight of the administration, Owen demonstrates his power to control his own fate and execute the will of God. Arms are used in A Prayer for Owen Meany as a way for God to communicate through Owen. The symbols of the armadillo, dressmaker’s dummy, and Mary Magdalene represent how Owen receives power from God.

Hands are also prominent symbols in religious scripture and A Prayer for Owen Meany. The Rev. Edward Craig Mitchell claims that God blesses his

constituents by “ the laying-on of hands”, and thus the laying-on of hands symbolizes the communication of divine power (168). Irving writes that “ you simply had to put your hands on Owen,” (31), and that girls who saw him were “ compelled” to touch him (352). Throughout the book, characters such as Johnny’s mom, Mary Beth Baird, Hester, and Owen’s Sunday School peers, are moved to touch him by some unnamed force. This force is the attraction of his supernatural powers; by touching Owen (‘ the instrument of God’), one is able to feel closer to God and receive his message. In Buddhism, mudras, or finger-based patterns, are used to express and communicate divine messages. According to Stanford University’s Exotic India Newsletter, mudras are “ used to evoke in the mind ideas symbolizing divine powers or the deities themselves” (Kumar). When Owen amputates Johnny’s finger to help him avoid the draft, he is using his ‘ powerful’ hands to decide Johnny’s fate, and remove some of his ability to communicate with God. As a consequence, as an adult, Johnny is uncertain of his faith. Irving writes that Johnny went through a period of concrete faith in Canada, but began to question it. Johnny says: “ my belief in God disturbs and unsettles me ... belief poses so many unanswerable questions!” (504). Johnny’s faith is founded on his belief in miracles, namely Owen’s existence; his doubt is founded on questions that he cannot answer, most of which are political or ethical. Irving uses hands in A Prayer for Owen Meany to symbolize communication, or lack thereof lack of in Johnny’s case, with God.

In A Prayer for Owen Meany, author John Irving presents Owen Meany as a deity through symbolism, particularly through the symbols of arms and hands. In Christian and Buddhist scripture, arms and hands are used as

symbols of religious authority and communication with a divine power. Irving uses arms and hands, particularly those of Owen, to show that he has the power of God, and that his life is devoted to expressing the will of God. Other symbols include the armadillo, dressmaker's dummy, the statue of Mary Magdalene, and Johnny's amputated finger. These represent the transfer of celestial capacity from an object onto Owen. Owen's power as an expression of God's will is the miracle that is the foundation of Johnny's faith, and is used to conclude that faith and doubt come in conjuncture.