

Growing up in a separate peace



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As Ernest Hemingway once wisely proclaimed, “ All things truly wicked start from innocence” (Hemingway 73). The truth in Hemingway’s words is that most everything does begin as pure and true, and only through a series of components does it turn into something that could be labeled as “ wicked.” The most common of these components for human beings is the end of youth and ignorance in the form of adolescence. Coming of age siphons off the innocence initially inhabiting a person as they mature becoming more aware of their surroundings and themselves. This concept is illustrated throughout John Knowles’ novel *A Separate Peace*, a story of individual growth in the midst of the chaos of World War II at Devon Academy, a prestigious all-boy school in New England. Protagonist Gene Forrester and his best friend Phineas face the darker side of adolescence in this harrowing and thought-evoking parable. The widespread destruction occurring in the distant war is reflected in the more local and personal damage characters such as Gene and Phineas are experiencing in everyday life; the war itself is another component that aids in the ruination of innocence. The events of one summer, like the world war, banish the innocence of these boys and their world. With the dynamic and evolving characters of the novel, John Knowles develops the quintessential Bildungsroman to demonstrate the downfall of innocence in the face of adolescence during a wartime setting.

Before Gene and Phineas share the ultimately fatal incident in the tree, Gene is ignorant to suffering; he is childish, fearful, and unsure of himself.

Adolescence is a difficult time for any youth, but growing to maturity during wartime presents unique pressures. In the very beginning of the novel, a tree overhanging the Devon River, used as part of an obstacle course preparing

the senior class for recruitment, triggers the war within Gene when his friend Phineas, known as Finny, challenges him to jump into the river from one of its highest branches. The tree, a Biblical symbol referencing the story of the Garden of Eden, represents temptation to Gene, "...it is the means by which Gene will renounce the Eden-like summer peace of Devon and, in so doing, both fall from innocence and at the same time prepare himself for the second world war" (Ellis 79). Gene eventually gives in to this temptation, saying, " With the sensation that I was throwing my life away, I jumped into space...I felt fine" (Knowles 17). However, Gene was not throwing away his life, only beginning to demonstrate his insecurity in feeling threatened by both Finny's dare and the natural obstacle the tree presents. By continuing with his actions nonetheless, he is placing his fear aside in a gesture characteristic of an inexperienced adolescent, and by acknowledging that indulging in this temptation was satisfactory to him, he is just starting to learn what he is capable of yielding to, no matter the consequences. Additionally, as the first chapters of the novel progress, it becomes evident that Gene is hiding a deep resentment for Finny, a jealousy of his athleticism, spiritual purity, self-assuredness, and easygoing nature that he could never achieve. These feelings are pushed aside so as to not be apparent to Finny, classmates and teachers, and even to Gene himself, but they are subtly recognizable as the storyline follows Gene's own stream of consciousness. Gene shows his uncertainty of himself when he asks himself questions such as, " Why did I let Finny talk me into stupid things like this? Was he getting some kind of hold over me?" (Knowles 17). These unanswered questions prove not only Gene's troubles with Finny, but also his feeling of losing control over his very being. The opening of the novel brings

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to light certain characteristic negative traits belonging to Gene, "...his fear of not measuring up in the eyes of his peer group, his latent hostility towards and envy of Finny, and his tendency to use indirect responses such as sarcasm in verbal retaliation" (Bryant 43). There are also physical symbols in the boys' weight and height that exemplify Gene's lack of growth at this point of the plot. Gene claims to be five feet, nine inches until Finny, "...had said in public with that simple, shocking self-acceptance of his, ' No you're the same height I am, five-eight and a half'" (Knowles 16), revealing in Gene's small lie his adolescent insecurity and his intent on gaining even the slightest advantage on Finny. Another example includes the 150 pounds Finny weighs in comparison to Gene's 140 pounds, symbolic of the fact that " Finny is a ' larger' person than Gene in terms of spirit; he has a greater heart and more magnanimity, which would symbolically account for his greater weight" (Bryant 43). The physical similarities between the two make the psychological differences more pronounced, the major difference being that Gene has neither the security nor the confidence of his friend. In addition, Finny's personality accentuates Gene's naivety and juvenile behavior, his overall ignorance that allows him to be labeled as innocent, in the scene where Finny insists on wearing his pink shirt, a radical fashion item for the time period. Gene declares the flamboyant shirt " makes him look like a fairy" (Knowles 24), but Finny's humorous responses show that he is undaunted by taunting and is surer of himself and his sexuality than Gene. Even more bewildering to Gene than the shirt itself is Finny's insistence that it is an emblem, telling Gene that he " was reading in the paper the other day that we bombed Central Europe for the first time" (Knowles 24). Finny's unusual show of patriotism and celebration of overseas achievements in the

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war makes Gene uncomfortable; he knows he does not have the courage to be indifferent to judgments against him or to contribute to the “ war effort” when he is just starting to wage war on the changes occurring within himself. Therefore, Knowles reveals in the first part of the book Gene’s starting point of change, the callow base from which he will grow.

The point of the rising action in *A Separate Peace* develops onward from the most primitive yet most complex event of the novel – Phineas’ “ fall” from the symbolic tree and subsequently Gene’s fall from innocence and ignorance. Before Gene essentially causes Finny’s devastating fall from the tree to the riverbank, his envy, confusion, confliction, and anger boil over. He experiences absurd paranoia, thinking to himself, “ Finny had deliberately set out to wreck my studies...That way he, the great athlete, would be way ahead of me. It was all cold trickery, it was all calculated, it was all enmity” (Knowles 53). Gene confronts Finny in an attempt to force him to confirm his motives for the creation of all his unique “ extracurriculars” that he believed would prepare them for war, such as blitzball, the Super Suicide Society, and spending the night on a nearby beach. When Gene realizes during the confrontational conversation that it is entirely one-sided – Finny never intended to disrupt him, Finny has no resentment or jealousy towards him – his spirit is crushed. Gene now understands that he is “ not of the same quality” (Knowles 59) as Finny, and he is “...not capable of maintaining the spiritual purity that distinguishes Phineas and so must as he discovers his own savagery betray Phineas” (Ellis 80). This betrayal shows itself when Finny asked Gene to perform a “ double jump” from the tree with him, a sign of Finny’s forgiving interpretation of their friendship, and Gene complies,

only to jostle the branches where Finny stands ready to jump, knocking him down to land awkwardly on the riverbank and shatter the bones in his left leg. The act is obviously unpremeditated; he cannot stand his inferiority to Finny, and so he impulsively and reflexively brings Finny back to a standing in which he can compete with him again. It is at this point that Gene has pushed away his innocence and peace of mind completely by practically pushing Finny figuratively from his superiority and literally from the tree; it serves as Gene's initiation into "the ignorance and moral blackness of the human heart" (Ellis 82). This demonstrates that, "The price of peace is self-awareness" (Weber 55). In order for Gene to assure his own individuality, he subconsciously has a need to relegate Finny, who represents the aspects of Gene's own personality, such as intuitivism, purity, and sensitivity, which need to be eliminated in preparation for participating in the war raging overseas. In addition, the scene involving the pink shirt, plus an intimate scene on the beach in which Finny sincerely tells Gene he is his best friend without receiving a response, are crucial in asserting that Gene is not altogether comfortable with his sexuality, an intuition that, as mentioned before, can be connected to adolescent insecurity. Gene's reflexive disposal of Finny has the potential to be related to his destruction of his innermost emotions that make him vulnerable; vulnerability is not a quality desirable to a youth who has the knowledge that he will soon be thrust into a horrific war. Next comes Gene's rebirth, his baptism by jumping into the river immediately following Finny's fall. This leap into the water below is the leap into adulthood; it is the first of Gene's actions since the start of the novel that he is absolutely sure of, as he narrates, "With unthinking sureness I moved out on the limb and jumped into the river, every trace of my fear

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forgotten” (Knowles 60). Gene’s jump is a rite of passage to him, and the water that he jumps into cleanses him of his youth, changing his understanding of himself and the world that comes with the transition from innocence to experience. The baptismal symbol signifies the restoration of Gene’s life and the start of his new identity (Foster 153-160). The irony is that the tree is both the platform of temptation and baptism. Also, the tree is important over the spectrum of Gene’s life because, “...it is by turns an occasion for danger, friendship, betrayal, and regret” (Wolfe 101), all features of typical of maturation and coming-of-age, bringing to light to the use of a Bildungsroman literary plot form. It is necessary to recall that the basis of this event around which the exemplum is formed is fear – fear of upcoming war service, of losing one’s individuality, and of entering the adult world.

After Finny’s actual fall and Gene’s symbolic one, Gene reaches catharsis through dealing with the loss of innocence, ignorance, and ultimately Finny himself as both the war and Gene’s adolescence come to an end. While Finny is recovering from his injury, Gene is guilt-ridden and regretful. No one knows that he was the reason for Finny’s injury, not even Finny, until the climax of the novel in which a group of Devon boys accuse Gene, causing a hurt and bewildered Finny to struggle to get away from them all, only to fall down a flight of marble stairs, advance his injury, and later die in surgery. Gene comes to realize his own moral ugliness in the very first conversation he shares with Finny since the fall, “ He was never going to accuse me...and I thought we were competitors! It was so ludicrous I wanted to cry” (Knowles 66). Even now, Gene cannot stand Finny’s spiritual purity. His temporary

solution to the internal conflict he feels is to assume Finny's identity, firstly by putting on Finny's clothes and secondly by trying his hand at a bout of rule-breaking that Finny would be proud of. This demonstrates a typical attempt of a growing youth; in the face of an identity crisis, one may find courage and reassurance in adopting a personality that does not belong to them, often opposite to their own, as is the case with Gene. By attiring himself in Finny's clothes, " Gene takes the first step in a profound self-evaluation. Through a series of acts of identification with Finny, he will keep alive the very side of himself that he had sought earlier to suppress" (Bryant 70). Gene's deep shamefulness causes his desire to hide himself. This goes on until the climactic scene when the true details of Gene's crime are brought to light in front of Finny and a large group of Devon students. During this time, Gene has been growing and changing, and his final transformation takes place when he visits Finny for the last time in the hospital before he has the surgery that, unbeknownst to them, will end his life. When he sees the stricken Finny, Gene is now more experienced and less shocked by violence because, " there were hints of much worse things around us now... the newsreels and magazines were choked with images of blazing artillery and bodies half sunk in the sand of a beach somewhere" (Knowles 179); this illustrates his acceptance of both the war overseas and the war between childhood and adulthood within him. Gene's purging of pity, and also his maturation, is shown when he makes a full confession to Finny about the events at the tree; it is the first time that both Gene and Finny come to terms with it. Gene acknowledges that Finny embodied a type of enlightenment that he had never reached, and he guesses that, " Finny's innocence represents the spirit of peace so that his very presence would

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make war appear unacceptable. His goodwill and fundamental idealism would overcome the fear and hostility that fuel war between men” (Bryant 106), which is exactly why Finny was the vital component to Gene’s coming of age. The death of Finny, a true innocent soul, is symbolic to the end of Gene’s years of ignorance and innocence. When he says, “ I did not cry then or ever about Finny...I could not escape the feeling that this was my own funeral, and you do not cry in that case” (Knowles 194), he is exemplifying this very concept. Additionally, Knowles creates the first few pages of the novel to be narrated by an adult Gene visiting the grounds of Devon Academy for the first time in fifteen years, with the majority of the plot a flashback, a necessity to capture the completeness of a Bildungsroman, and to show the extent of Gene’s change. On this solemn visit in the opening of the book, the adult Gene makes a series of realizations that prove his personal advancement. He notes that he often used sarcasm in his youth as security for his weakness, that he and all his companions at Devon had spent their time in blissful selfishness, and that the harmony and change at Devon was now reflected in himself. He remarks wisely, “ The more things remain the same, the more they change after all...nothing endures, not a tree, not love, not even death by violence” (Knowles 14). Overall, Gene has changed for the better after that semester with Finny and since his acceptance of his life to come.

John Knowles’ *A Separate Peace* is one of the great American novels; it is representative of the theme that growing older snatches away the ignorance and innocence of youth, and growing older during a war only quickens this process. The classic account of friends Gene and Phineas, interwoven with

moral messages both subtle and direct, is a poignant and evocative timeline; it is the tale of one of the most challenging yet most common transitions that one can experience in life. The immersion into a harsh reality of adulthood, complete with injury, complex relationships, forthcoming warfare, and even death, as well as the revelations of human limitations, are what Knowles symbolizes with the events before, during, and after the fall of Gene and Finny at the tree. This novel appeals to the humanity of its reader because of the empathy it demands. As human beings, the experience of painful but necessary growth into adulthood is relatable, a journey of deepening understanding about responsibility and a place in the wider world. If it were not such a paramount theme of this book and life itself, would it not be repeated time and time again? The characters names are different, from Tom Sawyer to Holden Caulfield to Gene Forrester, but the principal constituent of the story is always the same – simply, growing up.

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