

One tree, hidden
meanings: a close
reading of symbolism
in a separate peace



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Everyone has a specific object or place that immediately floods them with memories. Whether it be the stretch of road where they crashed or a pencil they used to pass a huge test, these items are everywhere. The memories they hold can be painful or joyful, a beginning or an end, but what every object or place has in common is that it holds significance beyond what meets the eye. Such a symbol in *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles, specifically to Gene Forrester and Finny, is the tree along the bank of the Devon river. While it may look like any other tree on the bank of the river to most people, to the students at Devon during 1942, it symbolizes many things. The tree serves many purposes in the novel *A Separate Peace*, some of which being to symbolize friendship, fear, and youth. One of the main things that the tree in *A Separate Piece* symbolizes is the friendship and bond only formed through an abnormal activity. For Gene and Finny especially, this action is jumping into the river from the tree. Out of this bond forms the “ Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session.” Gene depicts the formation of the society when he recalls “ Rigid, I began climbing the rungs, slightly reassured by having Finny right behind me. “ We’ll jump together to cement our partnership,” [Finny] said. “ We’ll form a suicide society, and the membership requirement is one jump out of this tree.” “ A suicide society,” I said stiffly. “ The Suicide Society of the Summer Session” (Knowles 31). The tree serves as a means to bond Gene and Finny even more than before as explained in how they cement their partnership. Without the tree to jump from, there never would be a society and Gene and Finny never would experience the bond created in their jumps from the tree. While the idea of jumping from the tree binds the two friends, the first jump indebts Gene to Finny. Finny saves Gene from suffering a drastic fall from the tree, so Gene is

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forever grateful to Finny. Gene realizes this fact when he reflects that “ If Finny hadn’t come up right behind me...if he hadn’t been there...I could have fallen on the bank and broken my back! If I had fallen awkwardly enough I could have been killed. Finny had practically saved my life” (Knowles 32). While Gene is not ecstatic Finny even forced him up onto that limb and so he does not give Finny a large outward expression of gratitude, the sequence of events that created the society and Finny saving Gene solidifies the special bond between the two. They are in something bigger than their feelings towards each other. Even though the Suicide Society is short-lived and largely unimportant, their bond becomes so much stronger than simply being normal friends. Gene stays by Finny’s side to the end while Finny is on his deathbed for more reasons than just that he ultimately caused his death. He didn’t stay out of pity or a sense of duty, Gene stands unwaveringly even when Finny pushes him away, as he loves Finny. Gene and Finny aren’t friends, they are brothers due to a simple friendship being cemented and blossoming into something more through the experiences they share, many of which occur due to the tree on the bank of the Devon River. While friendships thrive due to the tree, fear also has its roots in the tree and the experiences it holds during the summer session of 1942. Eventually Gene fears what he has become, but it all began as a fear of his best friend. Gene describes his delusional anger and animosity towards Finny when he recalls “ I found a single sustaining thought. The thought was, You and Phineas are even already. You are even in enmity...Finny had deliberately set out to wreck my studies...that explained his insistence that I shared all his diversions...It was all cold trickery, it was all calculated, it was all enmity” (Knowles 53). Gene accuses Finny of trying to hurt Gene, but the feeling

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stems from jealousy and a deep, hidden fear that Finny really is so much better than him. Gene must console himself and justify his anger towards Finny in some way, and he chooses to do it in a way that frames Finny. All the pent up disgust and anger towards Finny boils over when, jumping from the tree with Finny once again, Gene says "...my knees bent and I jounced the limb. Finny, his balance gone...tumbled sideways... and hit the bank with a sickening, unnatural thud. With unthinking sureness I moved out on the limb and jumped into the river, every trace of my fear of this forgotten" (Knowles 59-60). Gene fears for himself and what Finny is supposedly trying to do to him, so he makes the decision to push him. Not only does he alter Finny's life in one action, but he feels nothing after, jumping into the river with no emotion at all. Gene let his emotions get the best of him and control him, as the jealousy he has always had for Finny that leads to the fear of Finny taking away the one thing Gene has the advantage in: his studies. Gene acknowledges this when he finally admits " I never killed anyone and I never developed an intense level of hatred for the enemy. Because my war ended before I ever even put on a uniform; I was on active duty my whole time at school; I killed my enemy there. Only Phineas was never afraid, only Phineas never hated anyone" (Knowles 204). The fear of betrayal Gene feels towards Finny culminates at the tree, and for that reason the tree can be seen as a means to bring out fear of others and one's own inner thoughts and beliefs. The final thing the tree symbolizes in *A Separate Peace* is youth. The whole story is told as a flashback when Gene revisits Devon many years later, and many of his initial reflections begin at the tree and how he grew up on the very same branches that are now dying. The main reflection Gene has is described when he thinks " This was the tree, and it seemed to me

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standing there to resemble those men, the giants of your childhood, whom you encounter years later and find that they are not merely smaller in relation to your growth, but that they are absolutely smaller, shrunken by age. In this double demotion the old giants have become pigmies while you were looking the other way” (Knowles 14). Gene reflects that the tree symbolizes how he has matured since the time he spent at Devon. He and all of his friends were just boys during their time there, and the fact that their youth is so important puts even more emphasis on the fact that they were being sent to war less than a year from the time of the flashback Gene is having. The decaying tree shows how something that was once an accomplishment to jump from is now dying, and the memories made there are fading with it. Everyone grew up so much at that tree from Finny’s life being changed to Gene realizing that a small part of him has always had disdain for Finny’s charisma and seeming perfection. This tree holds major milestones and events in the lives of all the boys who attended Devon during the summer session of 1942. It symbolizes war as students prepared by jumping from it. It symbolizes tragedy, but it also symbolizes joy and freedom. The tree on the edge of the Devon River is where the boys of Devon were exposed to the real world in Finny’s fall and its consequences, but also in the joy found in friendship. Thus, it also represents youth, as making mistakes, learning from them, but having fun along the way is what growing up is all about. The tree at Devon symbolizes much about what life was like there during the year of 1942, as it was full of friendship, fear, and growing up. Many people can not only point out a specific place that brings them memories, but they can confidently say that it is where they grew up more than anywhere else. The tree was such place at Devon. The summer

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session of 1942 is when these boys became men due to all the tragedy occurred but being able to live on. There is more than what meets the eye to one specific tree at Devon, and that is what makes the tree so symbolic of 1942 Devon School.