

# A separate peace analysis



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In John Knowles book A Separate Peace he communicates how the war in him was taking its toll on him. He uses the characters in a complicated plot to show the destructive forces of war. The characters, Gene and Finny, are the opposing forces in a struggle between the reality of war (World War II) and a separate peace. A peace away from the real war and the awful things that come from it. Through their relationship, which is a struggle on both sides, Knowles establishes the reality of war through a relationship.

Gene Forrester is established as the force of reality. This idea is established clearly in a speech Gene gives as the narrator of the story.

“ Everyone has a moment in history which belongs particularly to him. It is the moment when his emotions achieve their most powerful sway over him, and afterward when you say to this person ” the world today” or “ life” or “ reality” he will assume that you mean this moment, even if it is fifty years past. The world, through his unleashed emotions, imprinted itself upon him and he carries the stamp of that passing moment forever.” (Knowles, 32)

This statement explains that Gene must have something that is his “ stamp”. This stamp defines an individual standing up for something he believes in. The next paragraph shows that this is true where Gene continues, “ For me, this moment-four years is a moment in history-war the war. The war was and

is reality for me. I still live and think in its atmosphere.” (Knowles, 32) Later in the same paragraph he goes on to say:

“ America is not, never has been, and never will be what the songs and poems call it, a land of plenty. Nylon, meat, gasoline, and steel are rare. There are too many jobs and not enough workers. Money is very easy to earn but rather hard to spend, because there isn’t very much to buy. The war will always be fought very far away from America and it will never end. Nothing in America stands still for very long, including the people, who are always either leaving or on leave.” (Knowles, 32)

This is what Gene stands for in the book *A Separate Peace*. Gene appears to understand the reality of war and how it affects people. Throughout the entire story Gene is used to bring the destructive reality of war into everyday life at Devon High School where there is an attempt to create and exist in a separate peace.

There is a reality known by Gene that is headed by Gene’s best friend, Finny. Finny has his own reality that he creates and exists in is the separate peace spoken of earlier.

Finny who is a very athletic person, begins to create this separate peace with games. Because Finny can’t face the reality of the real war, these games are a representation of the war. Finny makes the rules so that he can exist in these games as an invincible force. The first game Finny invents is “ The Super Suicide of the Summer Session.” This game consists of jumping of the limb of a tree into the river by Devon. As the game is invented, both Finny and Gene, agree to start it by being the first ones to jump out of the tree into

a river. One time Finny allows Gene to jump out first. This is the start of a separate peace.

“ We were standing on a limb, I a little farther out than Finny. I turned to say something else, some stalling remark, something to delay even a few seconds more, and then I realized that in turning I had begun to lose my balance There was a moment of total, impersonal panic, and then Finny’s hand shot out and grabbed my arm, and with my balance restored, the panic immediately disappeared.” (Knowles, 24)

In this instance Finny saves Gene from falling out of Finny’s world and into Gene’s reality. The idea of Gene understanding that this is Finny’s world comes in chapter three.

“ Yes, he had practically saved my life. He had also practically lost it for me. I wouldn’t of been on that d#%\* limb except for him. I wouldn’t have turned around and so lost my balance, if he hadn’t been there. I didn’t need to feel any tremendous rush of gratitude toward Phineas.”(Knowles, 25)

This is when Gene knows he was out of his reality and into Finny’s world, and Finny’s world could have taken his life. This game goes on to progress into a more warlike atmosphere. Gene goes on to explain how he and Finny signed up trainees on the spot and how they initiated them every night. This is like the basic training and initiating of real soldiers in a war.

Finny also creates another game that substitutes for the real war: Blitzball. It is known that this game is related to the war because a boy present during the invention of the game, Bobby Zane says, “ Let’s make it have something

to do with war.” (Knowles, 29) Finny likes this idea and goes with it. Finny goes on to make up all kind of rules. After all of the parts of the games were invented Gene realizes, “ That he unconsciously invented a game which brought his own athletic gifts to their highest pitch.” (Knowles, 31)

“ The odds were tremendously against the ball carrier, so that Phineas was driven to exceed himself practically every day when he carried the ball. To escape the wolf pack which all the other players became he created reverses and deceptions and acts of sheer mass hypnotism which were so extraordinary that they surprised even him.” (Knowles, 31)

Blitzball was made up by Finny so that he could be in control. This is like Finny’s world of a separate peace. Finny’s reality of war is much like the games he invents. Finny’s reality comes into making up his own rules while eluding the real rules. In doing so no one ever really holds Finny responsible to make him abide by the real rules. One example is when Finny wears a pink shirt which he explains is an emblem for the bombing of Central Europe (Knowles, 18). He explains that because he has no flag to fly for them-or anything else related-he will wear the pink shirt. Finny avoids having to conform to the real rules in school that day when Mr. Patch-Withers asks Finny about it-surely because he normally disapproves of such rebellious behavior. Finny again explains what he explained to Gene and avoids any trouble. Gene comments, “ It was hypnotism. I was beginning to see that Phineas could get away with anything.” Further evidence of Finny’s ability to make his world-or separate peace-comes on the following page. Mr. Patch-Withers offers the “ traditional term tea to the Upper Middle Class” (Knowles, 18). While at this event Finny explains all of his thoughts about the bombing

of central Europe. While doing so he poses a question to others, “ I think we ought to bomb the daylight out of them, as long as we don’t hit any women or children or old people, don’t you?” He continues, “ Or hospitals . . . And Naturally no schools. Or churches.” Finny doesn’t fully understand the impact of war on people, he doesn’t understand that war kills people physically and mentally and he doesn’t understand that it affects everyone that has a close relationship with the it (not including himself). It affects women, children, old people, hospitals, churches and schools. Finny has created a false reality here and it is emphasized even more on the next page when he says he believes that, “ the school is involved in everything that happens in the war, it’s all the same was and the same world” (Knowles, 20). The truth is that the war is partially involved in the war, but not the way Finny believes it is. Finny has created a separate peace at Devon that he substitutes for the real war.

Meanwhile, Gene understands that the war is being fought on is, “ All foreign lands inaccessible except to servicemen; they are vague distant, and sealed off as though behind a curtain of plastic.”(Greiling) This passage shows us that Gene may of not fought a war first hand and doesn’t understand its true destruction bought does understand it to his best knowledge. This is unlike Finny who creates his own war in Devon. This is Finny’s separate peace because it lacks the real characteristics of the real war.

The point in the book when everything turns is when Finny announced “ Leper was going to take his first leap.” This was not the first time that Leper had said this, but Gene went along anyway. When they arrived Finny announced that Gene and him were going to make the jump together. This is

the first time that the two different realities are set next to each other. While on the limb Gene “ Jounced the limb.” (Knowles, 52) “ Finny lost his balance and fell violently and shattered one of his legs while Gene jumps with unthinking sureness. Here we see that when the two realities compared side by side. Finny’s falls and shatters while Gene’s succeeds with sureness. “(Ellis, 313) After falling out of the tree Finny’s way of creating a separate peace was finished. Finny will never be the same after this.

“ Peace has deserted Devon” (Knowles, 64) this is the title of chapter six. Finny isn’t present at Devon at the beginning of the fall session. This is indicating the lack of peace; the lack of peace the school has learned to know when Finny was present. With the lack of Finny’s reality the reality of war begins to seep into Devon.

As school goes on winter comes around, and two hundred boys are recruited to shovel snow off the railroad yards as part of the war effort. Then later on in the same chapter Brinker announces, “ I’m giving it up, I’m going to enlist. Tommorrow.” This is just the beginning of war starting to seep into Devon.

“ Five of the younger teachers were missing, gone into the war. Mr. Pike had come in his Naval ensign’s uniform. . .” With all of this happening Finny is not going to give up his reality without a fight. Finny found out that Gene had signed up as an assistant to a team and informs Gene “ if I can’t play sports, you’re going to play them for me” (Knowles, 77). Gene doesn’t go against this because of the great friendship he shares with Finny. That and he might be feeling bad for what he has done to Finny.

To try to resurrect Finny's separate peace, he tells Gene, "You're going to be the big star now." Gene is hesitant to take this on and goes on to explain that sports didn't seem as important to him with the war on. Finny responds to this, "Have you swallowed all that war stuff. . . there isn't any war." This is the point at which Gene comes to realize that Finny doesn't believe there is a real war going on. Finny goes on to make Gene do what he can no longer do: compete physically. He does this in order to keep the idea of the separate peace alive. The idea of Finny not understanding the war is emphasized more when Finny tells Gene that he is going to train him for the Olympics in 1944. Gene responds by telling Finny "there isn't going to be any Olympics in 44. That's only a couple years away. The war-" Finny's response is, "Leave your fantasy life out of this. We're grooming you for the Olympics, pal, in 1944." Finny openly defies the idea that there is a war going on and that it is affecting people around the world. The 1944 Olympics do not occur. This is the beginning of the end for Finny's separate peace and the events that follow bring out the undeniable reality of the war.

The reality of war is on them when they receive a telegram from Leper saying,

"I have escaped and need help. I am at Christmas location. You understand. No need to risk address here. My safety depends on you coming at once."

Your Best Friend,

Elwin Leper Lepellier



Gene goes to visit Leper and finds he has changed. The first thing he notices is Leper's left side of his lip lifting involuntarily. Gene comes to find that Leper abandoned the Army after realizing that he was going to receive a Section Eight any ways (a Section Eight is a discharge because of a lack of psychological control). It is found that Leper does appear to have mental illness and has turned into a violent person who is very angry-something that Leper definitely wasn't before he was in the war. Gene brings the news of Leper's situation back to the school to lay out the undeniable confirmation of the war. Leper has proven to us that there is a war and that it can kill the body and spirit.

Eventually there is a trial to find out the truth about Finny falling out of the tree. The trial never found out if Gene made the limb bounce, but there was a deeper meaning in the trial. When the boys were arguing about the truth Finny says, " I just don't care. Never mind!" (Knowles, 169) Gene then narrates, " These words shocked Phineas into awareness." (Knowles, 169) Finny then runs out of the room and then falls down the stairs. Finny's separate peace is shattered along with his leg. Finny then dies in a simple operation; Devon's separate peace is then shattered. With out Finny's separate peace Devon comes to the reality of war is upon them. Devon sets up a shop for making parachutes. This goes to show that indeed, Gene's reality is the truth: the war is very real and very destructive. (Ellis, 317)

" John Knowles communicates what war really is. He uses complex characters in a very complicated plot in order to convey the harsh, sad, cruel, destructive forces of war. Gene and Finny's relationship that includes

the opposition illustrates this fact. Their relationship is used by Knowles to establish the terrible reality of war in all of its essence.” (Greiling)