

# A separate peace: the descent into adulthood

Literature



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“ To the soul, there is hardly anything more healing than friendship” (Thomas Moore). In the young adult novel *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles, the main character, Gene, reminisces about his friends from high school and his most significant, vivid memories. The experiences Gene endures in high school result from each student’s apprehension of becoming enlisted in the ongoing war. This hidden sense of battle created within each boy gradually destroys their inner-youth. Thus, the theme that one’s loss of innocence is inevitable and devastating becomes clear through the seasonal shift from summer to winter and the effects of war.

The seasonal shift from winter to summer represents the boys’ fall into maturity, proving the theme that the loss of innocence is painful and unavoidable. While introducing the Devon School, Gene explains early on that " During the winter[,] most of [the dormitory Masters] regard anything unexpected in a student with suspicion... [but on] clear June days... they appear to uncoil... [and] a streak of tolerance is detectable" (Knowles 23). The Devon School, one of the most flourishing and strict boarding schools in New Hampshire, takes boys and toughens them into men using a rigorous lifestyle.

In the summer, however, the teachers let the boys skip meals and ditch school. Gene suspects that the Devon faculty lessens their grip over the boys because he and the other Lower Middlers, two ranks below the seniors, remind the teachers of youthful peace. Therefore, the students’ summer session symbolizes a naive phase in their lives before they reach the vast confusions and troubles of adulthood. However, when Gene’s dormitory Master, Mr. Ludsbury, returns to the school, Mr. Ludsbury chides Gene,

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lecturing that “ everything went straight to seed during the summer” and he declares that he will “ put... the dormitory back together”(Knowles 81).

With the inescapable coming of winter, order returns to Devon by several changes within the school. First off, the school holds an important sermon, heralding the winter semester. In Gene’s opinion the true intention for this sermon is to assert dominance over the student body and to put an end to the reckless summer nature. Secondly, the boys’ classes become more overwhelming, diminishing their leisure time and pushing them beyond adolescence. The atmosphere transforms into a rigorous setting, with “ winter bring[ing] loss, unreason and hardness of heart” (Wolfe).

Finally, towards the end of the novel, “[w]inter’s occupation seems to... conquer, overrun and destroy everything” and everyone at Devon (Knowles 128). From the malevolent perspective of Gene, winter has succeeded in ravaging every student’s life, forcing them to maturity. For instance, Gene’s athletic best friend, Finny, shatters his leg from falling off a tree. After the accident, Finny’s athleticism vanishes, and the gracefulness which defines Finny in the beginning of the novel ceases to exist.

With this plunge Finny advances towards maturity, losing a few of his earlier qualities. Additionally, Gene’s other friend Leper enlists with ski troops, breaks down, and becomes insane. Leper’s decline into insanity proves significant, since he starts out as the calmest of the boys, known for his appreciation of nature. Equally important, Gene gets into a brawl with Cliff Quackenbush, symbolizing Gene’s descent into the cruel world of adulthood.

Because Gene studies wholeheartedly for school, this incident is almost certainly Gene's first fist-fight.

Indeed, through the seasonal shift occurring at Devon, it becomes clear that winter signifies the hardships of life, correlating with the boys' coming of age. Along with the novel's natural shift with seasons, the effects of war on the boys depict the theme that the loss of innocence is agonizing and certain. Since the boys must enlist in the army by the end of high school, they are "all getting ready for the war" (Knowles 22), and as future soldiers, they "are conforming in every possible way to...everything that [i]s going to happen" (Knowles 23).

Because *A Separate Peace* takes place during World War II, each teenager must either enlist in the army in a particular military field or wait to be drafted. For that reason the Devon School "represents the last place of freedom and safety for the boys, guarding their last days of childhood" (Alton). Also, each boy, including Gene, undergoes changes to deal with the stress of what they must overcome. Gene attempts to rid himself of his cynical, calculating habits by mimicking Finny's care-free lifestyle while Brinker gains a dominant attitude towards his friends and tries to dictate all their lives.

In this way each individual student changes to prepare for the war and is pushed to their coming of age. A few moments before Finny falls down marble stairs, causing his death, the other students "steer [Gene and Finny] toward the First Building," and inside the main room, "above... in Latin flow[s] the inscription, Here Boys Come to Be Made Men" (Knowles 165).

After almost half a year, Finny realizes Gene's involvement in the tree accident, accepting the fact that Gene pushes him off.

Ironically, Finny's literal fall down the stairs, which occurs late in the novel, symbolizes his figurative fall out of adolescence in which he finally comes to terms with the truth and stops living in his peaceful fantasy worlds. The inscription inside the room in which Finny accomplishes his character development directly parallels with the loss of innocence theme. Towards the end of the novel, Gene watches "the war mov[e] in to occupy [the Devon School]... with heavy trucks [followed by] troops" (Knowles 196). With the arrival of troops on the Devon campus, the war finally arrives.

Paradoxically, even though this moment is the first in which actual troops have come to Devon, there has already been a student casualty: Finny. In the middle of Finny's operation from his fall down the stairs, some of Finny's bone marrow travels to his heart, stopping blood flow. With Finny's early unfortunate death, Knowles successfully depicts the gravity of the idea of war and its effects. In this case, even before most of the students enlist in the war, they have already been broken into soldiers, losing their purity.

In short, the effects of war take its toll on the boys by forcibly urging them to manhood. In retrospect, the references to warfare and the depiction of the changes that come with winter are parallel with the boys' internal conflicts at school and how these conflicts force them into adulthood. Additionally, the destruction which follows winter emphasizes the cruelty and power of these conflicts and how much damage can arise. Therefore, through the novel, we

learn that everyone changes with this loss of innocence, but we can try to keep the relationships we have with our friends and loved ones the same.