

A look at a separate peace essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Set during the throws of World War II, *A Separate Peace* is a story about adolescent American boys in prep school, dealing with competition, jealousy, arrogance, and war. Knowles writes about how each individual boy copes with these things, based on their personalities. Each one is affected differently, however one thing they all have in common is the negative toll the war takes on each of them. Phineas goes into denial over the war, and doesn't even believe it exists; then his heart gives out.

Gene is blinded by a war that he sees as a glorious escape from himself. Brinker, once intelligent and motivated, becomes careless and resentful. The indirect, yet destructive effects that the war has on each of the boys, exemplifies Knowles' anti-war sentiments. Phineas denies the war's entire existence. He says that it is an invention of old rich men. But he really is just putting up a mask to hide his true emotions about the war. "' Don't be a sap,' he gazed with cool self-possession at me, ' there isn't any war. '" (p. 115).

Finny had always been the instigator, the trend-setter, but the one mainstream institution that he did not organize, or initiate excitement over, is exactly what he longs to be a part of. Gene tells Finny that even without a broken leg, his personality would not suit a war, but deep inside Finny does not agree. He wants to step into the role of valiant soldier, but he is very talented at masking his true emotions. This shows Knowles' belief that war puts pressure on young men to be something that they are not, even if they desperately want to meet that expectation in themselves.

In the end though, it is Finny's realization that he could never go to war, and fulfill that image that causes so much disappointment and frustration, that his heart literally breaks. Gene sees the war as a glorious escape from reality. Because of Gene's feelings of inferiority to Phineas, combined with his guilt over Phineas' injury, Gene wants to use the war as a way for him to feel like a hero. " To enlist. To slam the door impulsively on the past, to shed everything down to my last bit of clothing, to break the pattern of my life... " (p. 100).

He is naive about what war really entails because of the propaganda that was targeted toward boys his age. Knowles believes that it is the fault of the powers that be in life (for example the government, and their propaganda) that young men like Gene do not understand the war, and do not see it in its true form, but a sugar-coated version. Gene (among thousands of real boys at that time) believed that going to war was the noble and masculine thing to do, without really being warned of the treacherous and horrifying aspects of it. Gene wanted to run away from all that he knew he was.

He had become very angry inside, and the war was a looming alternative to his life. The once motivated and accomplished Brinker, was driven to uncharacteristic rebellion, and gave up on everything that he was passionate about, because of the war. " If he could not enlist-and for all his self-sufficiency Brinker could not do much without company-he could at least cease to be so multifariously civilian. " (p. 130). Brinker seems at first to be independent, but when Gene decides not to enlist with him, he goes weak at the knees. Perhaps the idea of going alone made him think harder about what war really is.

He must have realized subconsciously how dangerous and terrifying it would be, with or without a familiar face by his side. This realization caused him to become depressed, because he couldn't live up to the expectation of "masculinity" that the war set. Again harkening back to the immense amount of pressure the war put on young men (that is obviously so disgusting to Knowles). So he tried to become removed from himself. The fear and embarrassment that Brinker felt because he didn't enlist was the reason that he dropped out of all the school activities that he had once taken so seriously.

It is clear that John Knowles does not support war. The boys at Devon are all severely affected by the raging World War II in some way or another. Phineas chooses to turn his back on reality, and deny the very existence of the war. Gene refuses to see the horrifying truth of what war really is, and wants to use it as an opportunity to reinvent himself. Lastly, Brinker is ashamed at his personal inability to enlist, and withdraws from his usual activities. Although it comes about in different ways for each boy, the underlying current of pressure on all of them to prove themselves is what leads to their downfall.