

# A separate peace

Literature



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" A Separate Peace," by John Knowles, is a novel that tells the story of pain and betrayal of two friends, Gene and Phineas. One of the major themes of this novel is illusion versus reality. In the novel the proof of this statement can be found in incidents like Gene's visit to Leper's home, every ones personal attitudes towards war, experience of the war, and from the Winter Carnival. Firstly, Devon seems to be a place of peace, where the boys are removed from the war, but Leper makes the war and the real world's problem (outside world) more real to the boys at Devon.

Therefore, when Gene receives Leper's telegram it makes the war a reality, close to home. " I have escaped [from the war] and need help. I am at Christmas location. You understand. No need to risk address here. My safety depends on you [Gene] coming at once. " (129) Leper means that his military experiences have been horrible, when he tells Gene that he escaped from the war and begs him to come for a visit. However, when Gene arrives to Leper's home, he is shocked to learn about his strange hallucinations and that the army wants to give him a Section 8 discharge for psychological reasons.

Moreover, when Leper talks about his fearful images, caused by the war Gene cannot take it; he aggressively responds by saying: " This has nothing to do with me. Nothing at all. I don't care. " (143) Furthermore, in this incident Gene is refusing to acknowledge the reality of a world war, mainly because he has not yet resolved his own personal war (guilt of causing Finny's accident). By the end of this incident, however, it is apparent that man cannot really run away from anything - in this case reality.

In addition, from the forming of the Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session, to the shoveling of snow at the railroad yard, everyone at Devon becomes absorbed by the reality of war. Gene's realization, while shoveling snow, that " we [he and his schoolmates] seemed to be nothing but children playing among heroic men" (89) demonstrated his generation are simply the hostages in a global conflict - the real war. For Gene and Finny, unlike Leper, they realize their dependency on each other. Hence, their friendship would not have evolved if it were not for the war.

Although, both Gene and Finny experienced an inner and outer war (Gene's envy & guilt towards Finny, and Finny not being able to enlist in the war because of his broken leg), internally they are searching for their own separate peace that is found at Devon because they feel safe from the harsh external around them. Unfortunately, for everyone the war seems a reality when Leper enlists. Since, " Bombs in Central Europe were completely unreal" (23) before Leper's enlistment all they saw about war were " a thousand newspaper photographs and newsreels" (23) however, when Leper enlist it becomes clear that war is inevitable for everyone.

This is evident when the Gene says: " And all of us [the boys at Devon], influenced by the vacuum of his [Leper] absence, would have felt the touch of war as a daily fact" (118) Moreover, the boys experience war when they play blitzball because like in a real war they work as individual units. For example, Bonny Zane, one of the boys at Devon suggests: Let's make it have something to do with the war (29) The boys, therefore, start the illusion of war by playing blitzball, which was game, actually created by Finny. Similarly, the casualties of the war were Finny and Leper.

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By fate and error they were led to disaster, for Leper it was temporary insanity, while for Finny it was death. From such experiences at Devon the boys realize that death and disaster are real, therefore war must be real as well. So from the beginning of the novel everyone's illusions about war become a reality by the end, because they start to dread it. More importantly, Gene often shows how illusion can be reached by feelings that change how reality is apparent and imagined.

This is especially evident when he looks for a tree by the river that has a special meaning to him. It [the tree] had loomed in my memory as a huge lone spike dominating the riverbank, forbidding as an artillery piece, high as a beanstalk," (5) he says, his similes describing the tree as a great, forbidding mass. Yet, when he sees it, he finds it " absolutely smaller, shrunken with age," (6) and nothing like the great giant he had saw. Perhaps the tree had actually shrunk since Gene's time; but this is a more proper example how things can be hidden or highlighted in the illusion through emotional factors, and a good introduction of the theme of illusion versus reality.

The actual realist is that Gene imagines his old campus in one way, yet when he visits, he finds it quite different; this happens often, as things can seem less unusual or important when revisited, yet be so huge in one's illusion. More importantly, the significance of the phrase " a separate peace", was mentioned once in the novel, when speaking of the Winter Carnival, Gene says: it was this liberation we had torn from the gray encroachments of 1943, the escape we had concocted, this afternoon of momentary, illusory, special and separate peace . (128).

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Again, the Winter Carnival that was also created by Finny was an illusion of peace within reality, because it helped him and his classmates divert their minds away from the war (reality). And it is important that it is called a "separate peace" because it points out that the peace achieved is not part of the surrounding reality, which, for Gene, is a world of conflict, a world at war.

In conclusion, throughout the novel Leper serves to bring the boys at Devon into reality and the real world; it is Leper's enlistment that brings the boys into reality about there being a real war from their illusion about war (blitzball, newsreels etc. ; however, Gene's illusion about the tree refers to the reality of how his life evolved around it. To restate my opening lines, the novelist of "A Separate Peace", John Knowles carefully intertwines the theme of illusion versus reality for the reader through various incidents such as, Gene's visit to Leper's home, the boys personal attitudes, their experience with war, and also through the Winter Carnival