



## A Note to the Reader

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cliff Hilligoss". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "C".

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# A Separate Peace

## Notes

including  
Introduction  
Chapter Summaries and Commentaries  
Character Sketches  
Critical Notes  
Questions  
Selected Bibliography

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## A Note on the Author

John Knowles was thrust upon the literary scene when his first novel, *A Separate Peace*, won both the Rosenthal Award of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the William Faulkner Foundation Award. Since then he has published two other novels which have received mixed critical reviews.

Knowles was born on September 16, 1926, in Fairmont, West Virginia. In his fifteenth year, he entered Phillips Exeter Academy and was there during the four years of the Second World War (1941-45). It is highly possible that some of the experiences utilized in *A Separate Peace* took place at this private school. After graduation, Knowles entered Yale University, from which he received a B.A. degree in 1949. While a student at Yale, he edited the *Yale Daily News* and contributed stories to the undergraduate literary magazine.

After leaving Yale, Knowles worked for a while on a newspaper in Connecticut and then accepted a position as an associate editor of the *Holiday* magazines, where he published articles on varying subjects. He soon decided to devote his entire time to writing and traveling. Since his twenty-fifth year, he has lived in France, Italy, the Near East, and the Greek Islands. Of his first novel, Knowles once wrote: "If anything as I wrote tempted me to insert artificial complexities, I ignored it. If anything appeared which looked suspiciously like a symbol, I left it on its own. I thought that if I wrote truly and deeply enough about certain specific people in a certain place at a particular time having certain specific experiences, then the result would be relevant for many other kinds of people and places and times and experiences."

## Introduction

*A Separate Peace* is a novel involving an adolescent's attempt to understand his world and himself. It is an age-old conflict set against a greater conflict World War II. In times of peace, the change from adolescence to maturity is in itself a tremendous conflict, but in times of war, the change becomes even more significant because the values of the world and of society are rapidly changing. Gene Forrester, the narrator of the story, is fighting a war within himself, concerning whether to live in the secluded and safe values found in a

peaceful prep school or whether to move out of this security and into the confusion of the adult world. At the same time he is waging war against the encroaching domination of his best friend's anarchic approach to life. The novel chronicles Gene's fluctuations between accepting and rejecting diverse aspects of these two worlds.

There are so many opposing elements in the novel that it would be tenuous to relate all of them in a short introduction. Some would include the private war versus the public war; Gene Forrester's view of life versus Finny's view of life; adulthood versus adolescence; and a life of conformity as opposed to a life of freedom and spontaneity. Various aspects of these larger ideas are represented in symbolic form throughout the novel. For example, there is the upper, or clean, Devon River in contrast with the lower, or dirty, Naguamsett River; there is the summer session as opposed to the regular term; there is the life of study as opposed to the life of play; and then there are all the contrasts between time present and time past.

Throughout the novel, one symbol pervades the entire work. This is the tree. Knowles never makes the tree into a symbol which intrudes upon our realistic enjoyment of the novel, but we are constantly aware that it is being used as some sort of symbol. It first becomes a challenge for the boys in the lower grade to overcome. It suggests a victory over fear. But this is the forbidden tree which then suggests the biblical tree of knowledge or the tree of forbidden fruit. Using this view, we see that Gene becomes a changed person after jumping from the tree. Furthermore, he later uses the tree as the instrument by which he maims his best friend. In general, therefore, each reader should be aware of the varying ways in which the author uses the tree as a symbol and should be prepared to react to differing interpretations concerning its symbolic importance.

## List of Characters

### *Gene Forrester*

The narrator, who tells of his prep school experiences during his sixteenth and seventeenth years.

### *Phineas (Finny)*

Gene's roommate and best friend, the best athlete in the school.

### *Brinker Hadley*

One of the students, a leader of the class and the instigator of a trial against Gene.

*Leper (Elwin Lepellier)*

Another student, who becomes the first from the school to enlist in the armed service. He later becomes the first casualty when he "cracks up."

*Chet Douglass, Bobby Zane, and Quackenbush*

Additional students who function only in minor roles.

*Mr. Prud'homme, Mr. Patch-Withers, and Mr. Ludsbury*

Teachers at Devon School.

*Dr. Stanpole*

The doctor who treats Finny's leg.

## General Plot Summary

Returning to Devon School, Gene Forrester remembers his experiences there during the summer session when he was sixteen years old. The Second World War had just begun then. He remembers that his friend and roommate, Phineas (Finny) was considered the best athlete in the school and that one afternoon they went to a large tree by the river. Phineas suggested that they jump from this tree and land in the river beneath them. It was the first time that anyone so young had tried this feat usually reserved for older boys. Both successfully made the jump even though Gene was frightened. After this first jump, Finny organizes the Summer Suicide Society, which devotes itself to initiating members by having them jump from the tree into the river. Each time, he and Gene must make the first jump, but Gene never loses his fear of jumping.

Finny was considered the best athlete in school, and Gene tried to compensate by being the best student in school. After a few weeks of joining all of Finny's activities, Gene thinks that Finny is intentionally trying to make him fail out of school. He begins to resent Finny's many and involved activities. This resentment builds in Gene's mind until at the end of the summer, with many tests approaching, Gene must interrupt his studies too often to go jump from the tree. Finally, on one occasion, he impulsively jounces the limb and Finny falls.

Gene hears from the doctor that Finny's leg is so shattered that he can never again play any sport and will be lucky to walk again. Gene fears that Finny will report that he was pushed off the limb, but on his first visit to the infirmary, Gene knows that Finny has removed all suspicion from his mind. He trusts Gene completely and would never think of accusing Gene.

After the summer vacation, Gene detours by Finny's home and here decides to confess to Finny that he had pushed him out of the tree. But Finny refuses to

believe the confession and makes Gene leave. Back at school, everything is different without Phineas. Gene doesn't even bother to go out for any of the sports.

In the dormitory, a schoolmate jokingly teases that Gene deliberately "did away" with Finny so that Gene could have a room all to himself. Gene doesn't like the joke but feels that he has to go along with it.

The autumn session is also different because the students volunteer to do jobs left vacant because the workers are off to the war. Once, when many students have finished shoveling snow from a blocked railroad, many of them decide to enlist immediately. Gene is going to follow suit until he returns to his room and finds that Finny has returned to school. Then all thoughts of war fade from his mind.

Finny tells Gene that he must now develop into a good athlete for both of them. Finny will coach Gene for the 1944 Olympics. Gene tries to explain that with the war, sports are no longer important, but Finny refuses to believe in the war. He feels he has more insights than most people because he has now suffered so much. Soon, Gene begins to lapse into Finny's world of peace. A friend's enlistment does not even bring the war close to Gene. And later when the friend "cracks up" Gene goes to see him but still refuses to allow his friend's problems to intrude upon his present life.

Some time later, some of the boys from the dormitory come to get Gene and Finny. They all go to a big assembly room, where they want to clear up the matter of Finny's broken leg. They begin asking questions and suddenly, Gene realizes that he is being accused. Finny refuses to answer all the questions; he has put aside the possibility of Gene's guilt. He leaves the room in a terribly agitated state and falls on the slippery stairs and breaks the same leg again.

Gene follows Finny to the infirmary and tries to see him but this time Finny will not have anything to do with Gene. The next day, Finny wants to know why Gene pushed him out of the tree. It is agreed that the act was some sort of blind impulse. Later in the day when the doctor is resetting Finny's leg, some of the marrow gets into the bloodstream and Finny dies instantly. Gene does not cry then or ever about the death of his friend because he feels that he too has died and one doesn't cry over one's own death.

Later Gene realizes that the war never meant anything to him because he had fought his own private war and that he had killed his enemy at the school.

## Summaries and Commentaries

### Chapter 1

#### *Summary*

The narrator, Gene Forrester, returns to Devon School, where he was a student some fifteen years earlier. The school seems the same as far as the buildings are concerned, but fifteen years ago, there was a war going on.

As he walks about the campus, Gene realizes that he lived in great fear while he was a student. But he had not been able to identify his fear because it was always present. He has come back specifically to visit two fearful spots. One is the First Building (so named because it had been burnt and rebuilt and was still the main building) and the other is a tree down by the river. After noticing that the building is essentially the same as when he was there, Gene walks across the campus toward the river. It is a rainy day and he has to walk through a lot of mud in order to get to the river.

At first, he cannot recognize the tree that he is searching for. There are so many more than he has remembered. Then he finds one with "certain small scars rising along its trunk" and with one limb "extending over the river." This was the tree, but it is changed from what he remembers. He realizes that "nothing endures, not a tree, not love, not even a death by violence."

Walking away, he remembers his sixteenth year when he was an "Upper Middler" at Devon. He and Phineas (Finny) and three others come to look at the tree. Finny thinks it would be a "cinch" to jump from the limb into the water. Standing on a limb, "you could by a prodigious effort jump far enough out into the river for safety." But no Upper Middler has ever tried it. Finny is going to be the first.

Finny doesn't bother to talk about jumping; he simply asks who wants to be first. He is considered the best athlete in Devon, but Gene notes that he does not have an exceptional build. No one answers Finny, so he scrambles up the tree. Shouting about his contribution to the war, he jumps and falls "through the tips of some lower branches, and . . . into the water." Coming out, he says that the jump was the most fun he has had in a week. He asks "Who's next?" Suddenly, Gene finds that he is taking off his clothes and is up on the limb.

He has no intention of jumping that day, but somehow Finny has gotten a hold over him; there he is, about to jump.

With a sensation that he is throwing his life away, he jumps and lands in the water. He feels fine. Finny tries to get the others to jump, but they adamantly refuse. He turns to Gene and says, "It's. . . just you and me."

Walking back to the dormitory, Finny tries to kid Gene about how he was shamed into jumping. Gene denies it and they playfully wrestle several times. Each time, Finny wins. The others urge Finny and Gene to hurry because they will be late for supper. Surprisingly Gene resents the dinner bell and the conformity, and even though he realizes that Finny trapped him into becoming his collaborator, he jumps on Finny for another bout of wrestling, thinking that this will make them miss their dinner. This is what Finny wanted. When they are sure that they have missed dinner, they quit and return to the dormitory. They read their assignments and go to bed.

### *Commentary*

The first paragraph lets us know that the story is going back into the past. Consequently, we must be constantly alert to determine what this return to the past means in light of the later narration. The return to events in Gene's sixteenth and seventeenth years prepare us for an initiation story, that is, a story in which a young boy is initiated into certain aspects of life. Thus, we must observe each incident to see what the narrator will learn from this particular event. Furthermore, we must be aware that the events of the past are narrated against the background of the Second World War. To complement this, we have the more personal war being fought between Finny and Gene, but this second war is staged almost entirely within the mind of the narrator. There are also intrusions of a third war based on the school's intense athletic rivalry.

The difference between the past of fifteen years ago and the present can be seen in many of the descriptions. For example, the school now looks like a museum to the narrator, but earlier when he was there it "was vibrantly real." Thus, by these suggestions, we realize that Gene, the narrator, has learned a great deal about himself. This idea is further emphasized then the narrator notes that he lived in great fear during the past, but nevertheless did not understand this fear. Now after the lapse of time, he is able to evaluate the influence this fear had upon his life. In other words, he has matured and has incorporated the experiences of his youth into his total system of values. Some would then ask if this is so, why then does he return. In terms of the narrative, Gene returns simply to compare his emotional status with what it was fifteen years earlier.



It is important to note that the narrator visits two places when he returns. We later learn that these are the two areas which have most influenced his life. He first goes to the academic building (sometimes called the Main Hall and most often the First Building) because it was here that Phineas and Gene were brought before the group of students in order to be examined for the accident involving Finny's leg. Furthermore, it was in this building that Finny broke his leg for the second time. The second place he visits is the tree by the river. Gene pushed Finny from the tree and broke his leg the first time. Thus, the narrator is still noting "how far [his] convalescence had gone" as concerns his emotional maturity.

When the narrator leaves the First Building and goes toward the river, he must trudge through some soft and muddy ground which was "dooming his city shoes." He feels that at any other time, he would "have felt like a fool slogging through mud and rain, only to look at a tree." The mud that he plows through is somewhat symbolic. When Gene first jumps from the tree, he lands in the soft mud at the bottom of the river. Thus, his trudging through the mud here suggests a return to elemental emotions and elemental fears. The rain is also symbolic and as will be noted throughout the novel rain and water play an important symbolic role in Gene's life.

When he arrives at the river, he observes that there is a fog hanging over it, which obscures his vision. He cannot see so clearly the things which were so important to him as a youth. Likewise, there is a change in the physical appearance of the tree. This suggests the change which has taken place in the narrator, in fact the change that takes place in all mankind and throughout all time. Gene finally identifies the tree by the "small scars rising along its trunk" and seems to think that some of these scars are those left by his youth, still showing faintly on the adult man. Furthermore, he realizes that everything has changed: "Nothing endures, not a tree, not love not even a death by violence." Realizing this, he heads back through the mud and the heavy rain.

At this point, we have an immediate return to the past and the first thing introduced is the "all-important" tree. The reader should note, however, that the tree is merely introduced. Knowles does not linger in describing it or in attaching heavy symbolic importance to it, even though this tree does assume immense importance later in the work. In the three short sentences describing the tree, he packs into this description three heavily charged religious terms *steeple*, *damned*, and *hell* suggesting that if Gene climbs the tree (or

steeple) he will be damned to a hell of envy

and confused values. Phineas is also deftly described through off-hand colloquialisms some of these include words like *crazy*, *hypnotist*, *maniac*, *droll*, and *goofy*. These terms suggest that Finny will not be classified as among the ordinary students. Through the use of this type of language, we are able to subtly discern that Finny is removed from the average run-of-the-mill student. Furthermore, Finny's first comment characterizes him. He observes the tree and says, "What I like best about this tree . . . is that it's such a cinch." Actually, the tree is anything but a cinch, hence making the statement ironic, but Finny is always saying and doing the unexpected. We should also remember that this "cinch" of a tree will be the instrument of Finny's crippling, thereby making the statement doubly ironic.

Knowles is the master of understatement. For example, in describing Finny's early actions, Gene mentions that Finny always said "aey-uh" and that this "weird New England affirmative. . . always made me laugh, as Finny knew, so I had to laugh." It will be developed as a part of Finny's nature that he often sets up some situation in which he knows all the terms or in which he is the master of the events. His greatest pleasure, however, is having a surprise pulled on him in which he is not the master of the situation. At the end of the chapter, Gene trips Finny by surprise and Finny is delighted with this little trick.

Almost unknowing Gene begins to make Finny into some type of demigod who should be worshiped. Finny becomes some type of ideal who never makes a blunder or mistake. He is described as moving with perfect physical grace and harmony. But at the same time, Gene points out that he and Finny are the same size and that neither of them was of exceptional height or physical build. Thus, in comparison we must realize that Finny gains his power and influence through personal magnetism and not from any ready-made status acquired from the possession of a large physique.

Finny's physical attributes receive more attention in terms of his harmonious movement, his ability to flow rather than walk, his perfect coordination. Gene's life has been one of conformity, of moving with a received tradition. Ironically, Finny's influence in Gene's life will be in the nature of interference with natural impulses of conformity, of making Gene do the unexpected, such as jumping from the tree or later going to the beach and failing tests. Consequently, even early in this first chapter, Gene seems to realize that Finny is getting "some kind of hold over" him. This hold Finny has on Gene

will become the central conflict of the novel and will influence many of Gene's actions. He will fluctuate between extreme like and dislike of his position.