

### **The Escape From War and Conflict in Knowles' A Separate Peace**

In the novel A Separate Peace by Justin Knowles, the protagonist of the story, Gene Forrester, attempts to maintain a "separate peace," for which the novel is named, not only from the realities of war, but from his own internal conflicts. In order to accomplish this, Gene's underlying motive is to end his reliance on the antagonist, his best friend Phineas, and become a part of him, someone on whom Phineas would need to rely on. Phineas is often a source of much admiration and envy in the novel, and Gene's inner conflict is rooted in his insecurity over what he presumes is his rivalry with or inferiority to Phineas. The separate peace is a result of the accident that Phineas suffers at the hands of Gene, forcing him in a position to rely on him for help, and is perpetuated by Phineas' war conspiracy and Olympic fantasies, which Gene freely indulges in. In doing so, Gene loses himself in this idealistic world separated from the ongoing realities of World War II; but more importantly, he is also separated from his driving internal conflict against Phineas.

The separate peace is a direct (and perhaps fateful) result of Gene's insecurities. From the start on the novel, Gene constantly makes observations and glowing admirations of Phineas' natural abilities, such as his humility, courage, athleticism, and even his ability to get out of trouble. In admiration of this, Gene begins to feel noticeably envious towards his friend. As time passes, this jealousy turns to anger as Gene suspects Phineas is trying to get control over him, such as when he first convinces a nervous Gene to climb and jump out of the tree: "Why did I let Finny talk me into stupid things like this? Was he getting some kind of hold over me?" (p. 9) Following their stay at the beach (where Gene noticeably does not reciprocate Phineas' feelings

of friendship), Gene begins to assume that Phineas is trying to become the better student by deliberately distracting him from his studies. Suffering under this mental anguish, he retreats by intensifying his studies and maintaining a constant perceived rivalry with Phineas, which only culminates in an equally upsetting realization following Phineas' revealing generosity encouraging Gene to study instead of going with him: "He had never been jealous of me for a second. Now I knew that there never was and never could have been any rivalry between us. I was not of the same quality as he." (p. 51) Despite, or perhaps in light of, this realization, Gene acts on the impulse he has to push Phineas out of the tree, perhaps in order to make an impact Phineas in the only way he could.

Phineas' fall is a crucial turning point in the book, as it not only allows for the independence of Gene and for Phineas to become reliant on him, but for the separate peace to develop. Gene' baptism in the Naguamsett River established his newfound independence as he stuck up for Phineas against Quackenbush, at the start of the winter session. Phineas' return begins with his command that Gene take his place in sports where he himself was no longer able to, and this shows his new reliance on Gene: "I lost part of myself to him then, and a soaring sense of freedom revealed that this must have been my purpose from the first: to become a part of Phineas." (p. 77) Phineas' shock and dismay that Gene would leave him to sign up for the war (though perhaps resulting from his own jealousy) reaffirms his reliance on his friend.

It is Phineas' conspiracy theory of the war, however, that is instrumental to the separate peace. He theorizes that World War II is nothing more than a tool used by the old men of the country to keep the younger generation in line and sedated, and that there is no actual fighting happening anywhere around the world. It's to this theory that the wounded Phineas subscribes,

and Gene, eager to accept his new role in Phineas' life, is reluctantly but surely sucked into: "I stood there pitying Mr. Ludsbury [...] and reflecting that after all he had always had a gullible side. This was my first but not my last lapse into Finny's vision of peace." (p. 114-115) As an alternative to the realities concerning the war, Phineas convinces Gene that they would begin to train him for the 1944 Olympics, a ridiculous but enthralling goal that echoed Phineas' own lost chance at entering the Olympics. The war was nullified and substituted for Phineas' Olympian goal, and Gene was more than happy to indulge in both of these issues, as he became more of a part of Phineas and distanced himself from the realities of the war, and his own inner conflict:

He drew me increasingly away from the Butt Room crowd, away from Brinker and Chet and all other friends, into a world inhabited by just himself and me, where there was no war at all, just Phineas and me alone among all the people of the world, training for the Olympics of 1944. (p. 119)

The apex of the separate peace discussed in the novel is during the Winter Carnival. An event purely of Phineas' design ("It was [Phineas'] wildest demonstration of himself, of himself in the kind of world he loved; it was his choreography of peace." (p. 128)), it allowed the schoolchildren of Devon to have a fun time without concern for the war, the draft, or even for school. It embodied the liberty and freedom that was presumably allowed very few people during the war at that time, but which they, on the brink of being drafted, were allowed to experience:

It wasn't the cider which made me surpass myself, 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. (p. 128)

The separate peace then comes to an abrupt end, as the return of Leper puts Gene back into perspective about the realities of war, as it does Phineas. More jarringly, the trial set up by Brinker to try Gene for pushing Phineas out of the tree, and the accident which befalls Phineas as a result, create an even greater rift between Gene and Phineas. It is interesting to note, however, that even as Phineas was being carried away from the bottom of the staircase, and even though the accident was almost indirectly caused by Gene, he was still able to sense a connection between himself and Phineas: "The reason for this occurred to me as the procession moved slowly across the brilliant foyer to the doors; Phineas had always thought of me as an extension of himself." (p. 172) Gene later admits to Phineas that he pushed him out of the tree, for which he's forgiven, and the passing of Phineas is all but momentous.

While the separate peace Gene makes reference to is from that of the war, he also alludes to the separation he makes from his own conflict and enmity. The separate peace that he and Phineas experience is of an idealistic world without war, but only peace and the quest for the Olympian ideal, traits that primarily come from Phineas. Gene does not merely put aside his internal conflict during this peace, but he is able to overcome it. He observes after Phineas' death that Phineas alone was immune to the enmity that all humans suffer, and by becoming a part of Phineas, Gene was able to overcome this enmity himself. Eventually, as an adult, he can face the ghosts of his past and admit that he has conquered those ghosts. The separate peace that Gene experiences has a profound effect on him, as Phineas continues to impact Gene's entire life, even after his death.

The relationship between Gene and Phineas in the novel A Separate Peace is often tumultuous, but it cannot be disputed that they both were very integral in each other's lives. The separate peace enjoyed by the two was a period of separation from the realities of the war, a brief fantastical denial of future responsibilities that was permitted to very few people, even children during the time. However, Gene doesn't only seek peace from the World War at hand, but also from his own internal conflicts, which drive him to become a part of Phineas and escape the realities of his own situation.