

A Separate Peace



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN KNOWLES

The son of a successful coal executive, John Knowles grew up in a prominent wealthy West Virginia family. He attended Phillips Exeter Academy starting at age fifteen and graduated in 1944. He then served briefly in the Army Air Corps Aviation Cadet program and went to Yale after World War II. After graduating in 1949, Knowles worked as a journalist and travel writer and later began to publish short stories in magazines. Knowles's friend Thornton Wilder, another famous writer, encouraged him to write a novel based on his personal experience, so Knowles started writing *A Separate Peace* in the mid-1950s. Published first in Britain in 1959 and then the United States in 1960, *A Separate Peace* earned rave reviews and won Knowles the William Faulkner Foundation Award for best first novel and a nomination for the National Book Award. Knowles went on to write half a dozen more novels and spent the rest of his career teaching writing at various universities, including Princeton.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Characters in *A Separate Peace* act like patients given a diagnosis of a terminal illness: they must make the most of the time they have left on earth. The very real threat of being drafted to serve in World War II made the age of 16 or 17 a final safe haven in which to enjoy friendships, sports, and the other carefree pleasures of youth. Elwin "Leper" Lepellier's experience of enlisting in the Army, only to be terrified and soon desert, conveys the pressure and fear that adolescents faced during World War II. Even those who joined the war effort willingly often came back scarred for life.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

A Separate Peace is most often associated with another famous first novel about the struggles of an adolescent prep school student, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger. *The Catcher in the Rye* and *A Separate Peace* depict the physical and emotional turmoil of adolescence with an unprecedented dose of candor and detail. *Catcher* does so by taking an uncensored look into the mind of one character; *A Separate Peace* looks closely at the bond between two adolescent friends. The specter of World War II darkens both books as their protagonists attempt to preserve their youthful innocence while the grave and brutal reality of the adult world threatens to make them grow up too soon.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *A Separate Peace*
- **When Published:** 1959 in Britain; 1960 in the U.S.
- **Literary Period:** Modern American; Post-War Fiction
- **Genre:** Coming of age novel (bildungsroman)
- **Setting:** The Devon School, a private academy in New England in 1942–1943
- **Climax:** Finny's fall; Finny's admitting that the war is real; Finny's death
- **Point of View:** First person (Gene Forrester narrates)

EXTRA CREDIT

A Separate Flop. Paramount Pictures released a film version of *A Separate Peace* in 1972. The movie was poorly received by critics and was a commercial failure.

A similar reality. In writing *A Separate Peace*, Knowles drew heavily on his experience of spending two summers at Exeter in 1943 and 1944, which he has described as among the happiest times in his life. The character of Phineas is based directly on a student named David Hackett, who Knowles befriended in the summer of 1943 at Exeter. Hackett attended Milton Academy, a rival high school, during the regular school year.



PLOT SUMMARY

Gene Forrester, a man in his early thirties, returns after fifteen years to his prep school, the Devon School of New Hampshire. He stops at Devon's main building and then walks down to look at a large [tree](#) by the Devon River

The story shifts to 1942. World War II rages overseas, and the smart and careful Gene and his carefree and athletic roommate Finny are students at Devon's summer session. One day, Finny, Gene, and some other students hang around a big tree by the river. Finny climbs the tree and jumps into the river. Gene, though terrified, follows. Later that day, the two boys form a club, which they name the Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session. One of the rites of passage for joining the club is jumping out of the tree by the river. As summer continues, Gene and Finny grow closer. Yet Gene also begins to feel a deep rivalry with Finny. He envies Finny's athletic prowess, and suspects Finny has been trying to sabotage his academic success. At one meeting of Gene and Finny's suicide society, Finny proposes that he and Gene perform a simultaneous jump from the tree. As they both stand ready to jump, Gene shifts and shakes the branch. Finny [falls](#) to the ground, shattering his leg and his athletic career. Gene tries to confess to Finny what he did, but can't make himself do it before the summer ends.

On the way back to Devon in the fall of senior year, Gene visits Finny and confesses that he caused Finny's fall. Finny refuses to believe him. Gene returns to Devon and finds that the laxity of the summer session has been replaced by the strict rule of the regular masters. The senior boys' consciousness of the war also increases, and soon a boy named Brinker Hadley influences Gene to enlist, until Finny returns to school and convinces Gene not to. Everyone is shocked, however, when a dreamy boy named Leper Lepellier does enlist and leaves school.

Gene has decided that pursuits like sports feel trivial in light of the war, but Finny argues that war is just a creation of fat old men who want to control the younger generation. Soon Finny convinces Gene to start training for the Olympics—a dream that used to be Finny's. As Gene's training intensifies, the two boys regain their closeness and Gene gains a sense of internal peace that he's never before experienced. One day, Finny proposes that the boys hold a Winter Carnival. It's a great success, until a telegram arrives for Gene from Leper. Leper has deserted the military in order to avoid getting discharged for insanity. Gene goes to Leper's home in Vermont, where they have an argument in which Leper really does seem half-insane and accuses Gene of willfully causing Finny's fall.

Back at Devon, Brinker begins to question why Gene hasn't enlisted and suspects it has something to do with Finny's fall. Finny also spots Leper skulking around the school. One night, Brinker and a few other students round up Gene and Finny and hold a mock trial to investigate Finny's fall. They bring in Leper as a witness. He testifies that Gene caused Finny's fall on purpose. Finny stands up and shouts that he doesn't care either way. He storms out and falls down a nearby set of stairs and re-breaks his leg.

Gene tries to visit Finny at the infirmary, but Finny is furious at him. Gene spends the night wandering the campus and feeling as if he doesn't exist. The next morning he again visits Finny, and together the two boys agree that Gene's actions at the tree were not purposeful. Finny dies that afternoon, when some marrow from the break gets into his blood. Gene doesn't cry when he hears this, or at the funeral. He feels that Finny is now a part of him. The boys all graduate, and enlist in various safe branches of the military. Gene never sees active duty, but feels he fought his own war at Devon and that he understands the hatred all men harbor in their heart—all men, that is, except Finny.

School. As a student, he was extremely intelligent, vying for valedictorian. He was also sensitive and immensely competitive, especially with his roommate and best friend Finny, whom he meets during the summer session after junior year at Devon. In fact, Gene's relationship with Finny can best be described as love-hate. At times Gene so adores and admires his friend that he actually wants to be him, and goes so far as to dress up in Finny's clothes. At other times, Gene feels incredible resentment at Finny's athletic or social accomplishments, and imagines that Finny feels similarly competitive and is trying to sabotage Gene's academic success. At the end of the summer, this resentment builds to such a degree that Gene, either consciously or unconsciously, causes Finny to **fall** out of a **tree** and break his leg, destroying his athletic career. *A Separate Peace* reads like a long diary entry in which Gene tries to sort out what happened between him and Finny that summer at Devon and what has happened to him emotionally ever since. It's never clear how successful Gene is in this effort, and he should be considered an unreliable narrator.

Phineas ("Finny") – Gene's best friend and classmate at the Devon School. Finny is an extraordinarily talented athlete and a charismatic student leader who's earned the respect and admiration of the entire student body. Finny's freewheeling behavior often gets him into trouble, but his charming ways save him from every potential disciplinary snag. Finny's general outlook and demeanor is forgiving and optimistic, which contrasts with Gene's more cautious and rational approach to life. In fact, while Gene feels an intense rivalry with Finny, Finny shares none of Gene's competitive feelings. Instead, Finny assumes innocently and arrogantly that Gene and everyone else must share his carefree approach to life. One of the novel's central unanswered questions is whether Finny's naïve self-centeredness makes him deserving of Gene's resentment. Another mystery of *A Separate Peace* is whether the often idealized, or even angelic, portrayal of Finny rendered by Gene reflects the truth about Finny's character or rather Gene's unresolved guilt over Finny's death.

Brinker Hadley – The quintessential prep school student, Brinker comes from a wealthy family and is obsessed with truth, order, and justice. Like Finny, Brinker is well known on campus and is considered a leader. But while Finny stands for the freewheeling innocence of youth, Brinker represents the reserved discipline of adulthood. His fixation on getting to the truth leads him to suspect Gene of intentionally harming Finny, a claim that makes Brinker seem like the novel's most grown up and disillusioned adolescent.

Elwin "Leper" Lepellier – A member of Gene and Finny's circle of friends at Devon, Leper is an eccentric student who enjoys communing with nature. As the other boys play sports and leap from trees, Leper photographs beaver dams and goes cross-country skiing. His shy, gentle demeanor makes his decision to



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Gene Forrester – The novel's narrator and protagonist. At the novel's opening he is a man in his thirties looking back at his days as a student at private prep academy called the Devon

enlist in the Army all the more shocking. His ensuing breakdown and desertion from military service becomes a key facet of the novel's critique of World War II, which destroyed innocent boys like Leper emotionally and physically.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Cliff Quackenbush – The irritable and condescending Devon crew team manager. Disliked by most Devon students, Cliff mistreats anyone over whom he has any power.

Chet Douglass – An excellent student, tennis player, and trumpet player, Chet Douglass vies with Gene to be the valedictorian of Devon.

Brownie Perkins – Brinker Hadley's roommate and obedient sidekick.

Bobby Zane – A member of Gene and Finny's circle of friends during the summer, he refuses to jump from the [tree](#) from which Finny [falls](#).

Mr. Prud'homme – A substitute Devon house master on duty during the summer term. He has a less severe and forbidding demeanor than the term-time Devon masters.

Mr. Patch-Withers – The substitute Devon Head Master during the summer term. Like Mr. Prud'homme, Patch-Withers is less strict than the regular masters and is a sucker for Finny's charm.

Mr. Ludsbury – The house master of Finny and Gene's dorm during the winter term. A stern disciplinarian, Mr. Ludsbury works long and hard to maintain order. He despises the lax environment allowed by the summer session masters.

Dr. Stanpole – The main doctor at Devon's infirmary. He is caring and kind, and pities Gene and his friends for the world that they will soon have to face.

Phil Latham – Devon's wrestling coach who cares for Finny after he falls down the stairs.

Mr. Hadley – Brinker Hadley's father. His patriotic views offend Gene and Brinker.

enlist. This fact makes the separation between childhood and the adult world very clear. Childhood is the high school world of sports, dreams, and carnivals, while the adult world is one of war. And while many of the boys early in the novel, lost in a haze of childhood innocence, yearn to fight in the war, by the end of the novel they realize that the war and the adult world is full of hypocritical hatred and "honor." In fact, the first boy who does enlist, Leper, literally goes insane from what he finds.

Yet *A Separate Peace* is focused more closely on a war between individuals, a rivalry. This is a personal war of competing egos (or one competing ego), in which Gene's rivalry with his best friend Finny results in Finny's tragic accident, and then his tragic death. Through this personal battle, *A Separate Peace* shows the internal war people fight in making the transition from the "separate peace" of teenage innocence to the harsh realities of adult life. It also draws a parallel between the forces that motivate personal rivalries and the forces that result in World Wars, suggesting that both arise from the same flaws of enmity and jealousy in every human heart.



IDENTITY

Like most sixteen year-old boys, Gene and Finny and their friends struggle to define their identities.

World War II complicates their otherwise typical teenage identity crises and forces them to define themselves first and foremost in relation to the war. Different boys do this in different ways. Leper decides to enlist, even though military life contrasts sharply with his gentle, nature loving instincts. Brinker Hadley assumes an air of bravado. Finny denies the war exists at all. In each case, the boys are trying to define themselves against something in order to be men.

Gene goes through the same identity crisis, but his crisis resolves not around war, but Finny. Gene's admiration for and jealousy of his friend is so great that he literally loses himself in Finny. At one point he secretly dresses up in Finny's clothes. At another time when Finny is injured, he feels that he doesn't exist. Gene's personal identity is so wrapped up in Finny that in order to become an individual with his own identity, he has to destroy Finny. Through this tragedy, *A Separate Peace* makes the case that in the effort to define themselves as they grow into adults, people create false enemies out of true friends.



CHANGE AND GROWING UP

When Gene returns to [Devon](#) fifteen years after graduation, he looks at the [tree](#) from which Finny fell and thinks, "The more things stay the same, the more they change." The tree looks vastly changed only because Gene's perspective has changed as he grew up and became an adult. *A Separate Peace* is the story of this changing perspective, of how things both change and stay the same.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



WAR AND RIVALRY

Though not a single shot is fired in the novel, *A Separate Peace* can be thought of as a war novel.

World War II is a looming presence that none of the boys at Devon can escape. Once they graduate, they'll have to

As a story about boys anxious about growing into men, *A Separate Peace* contains numerous references to change. As the war looms, the carefree joy of summer at Devon turns into the strict discipline of autumn. Finny goes from an athletic youth to a cripple, and then turns Gene from a bookworm into an athlete. Yet though these changes are dramatic to the boys who experience them, when Gene revisits Devon he discovers that the school itself is much the same, almost like a museum. So while all the world felt like it was changing, it was in fact staying the same. Gene himself, however, has continued to grow, and so the very fact that the school stayed the same made it seem to him like it had changed: now the "giants of his childhood" don't seem like giants at all. Gene finds comfort in this: though in the grander scheme of things the world stays the same, because people change they can live harmoniously with their past, and even leave it behind.



SPORTS AND ATHLETICS

Finny views athletics as an "absolute good," and throughout *A Separate Peace*, athletic contests represent an idealized alternative to war. Like war, sports involve opposing sides intent on victory, but unlike war sporting events lack the casualties common to the battlefield. Finny's perspective on sports is exactly the opposite of his views on the war. He sees war as a construct invented by governments, a conflict in which everyone loses, while he believes "everyone always won at sports," which gives athletics a "perfect beauty." The novel supports Finny's ideas most powerfully by depicting Gene's experience while training for the Olympics. The intense training and single objective become a world of their own, a kind of cocoon surrounding Gene and protecting him from the fears of both adulthood and war. When he's training, Gene experiences the same inner peace that Finny had before his injury.



JEALOUSY

At the core of the conflict between Gene and Finny is Gene's desire to be more like Finny, or even to become him. Gene's jealousy of Finny corrupts their friendship and leads Gene to "jounce" Finny out of the [tree](#). Some of Gene's jealous feelings toward Finny are casual, such as his desire for Finny's carefree charm. Others are more deeply rooted, so much so that even Gene doesn't understand their origin. For example, Gene finds himself unable to respond when Finny says Gene is his "best pal." A deep-seated sense of envy and rivalry prevents him from reciprocating Finny's pure feelings of friendship. Gene's jealousy of Finny only wanes after Finny's injury destroys the traits about Finny that Gene most envied.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in [blue text](#) throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE TREE

The giant tree from which Finny falls looms in Gene's memory. As an adult, he imagines it as a "huge lone spike" or an "artillery piece," but when he sees it up close during his return visit to Devon, it looks small and unthreatening. Though the tree stayed the same, Gene realizes he has changed and grown past its ability to define or scare him. The tree is therefore a symbol of both the carefree joy and particular fears of boys growing into men, and a symbol that in time men can leave those fears behind.



FALL (AUTUMN) AND FINNY'S FALL

Finny's fall from the tree and the turn from summer to fall mark the novel's main points of change. During the summer session, the boys enjoyed a time of carefree youthful adventure. When the Summer Session ends and fall and winter come, everything changes: Devon returns to its strict disciplinary ways, and the threat of having to fight in the war darkens everyone's consciousness. The novel's other main "fall," Finny's, has much the same effect. With that fall, the joy of childhood Finny symbolized disappears, and the boys' different reactions to the fall help define who they'll be as adults.



THE DEVON SCHOOL

Gene and Finny's school is an oasis from change. A 160 year-old institution, Devon has successfully weathered the wars of the past and has changed just enough to adapt to the changes in society. One of Gene's first observations about the school is that it can adapt to change harmoniously; this thought inspires Gene to think that perhaps he too can change just enough to maintain his happiness.





QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribner edition of *A Separate Peace* published in 2003.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ "This was the tree, and it seemed to me standing there to resemble those men, the giants of your childhood, whom you encounter years later and find that they are not merely smaller in relation to your growth, but that they are absolutely smaller, shrunken by age...[for] the old giants have become pigmies while you were looking the other way."

Related Characters: Gene Forrester (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 14


Explanation and Analysis

As Gene Forrester explores his alma mater, the prestigious prep school Devon, he returns to a tree by the river. We do not yet know the significance of this tree, but the nostalgia that colors Gene's encounter with it alludes to its thematic importance in the novel. The tree, as Gene explicitly describes, serves as a symbol of "the giants of your childhood" -- the individuals that one views with unbridled admiration during your adolescence. Now, the tree seems physically smaller to Gene because it itself has shriveled, Gene has grown, and Gene's perspective has changed. Viewing this tree causes then Gene to become further "changed"; it provides him with an opportunity to reflect on this novel's themes -- finding an identity in relation to others, transforming as you are growing -- and begin the novel from a perspective of wisdom and introspection.

☞ "Nothing endures, not a tree, not love, not even a death by violence. Changed, I headed back through the mud. I was drenched; anybody could see it was time to come in out of the rain."

Related Characters: Gene Forrester (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

The shrunken tree reminds Gene of the scenery after a battlefield, the scenery which becomes colored with "death by violence." These descriptions and observations -- of a

"drenched" Gene moving "back through the mud," of the fact that "nothing endures" -- evoke martial imagery and the despair of war. Gene is very briefly described like a soldier, and this alludes to the central importance of World War II in the novel. In this moment, Gene recognizes that he needs to "come in out of the rain," and this physical movement parallels the internal transformations of coming to greater knowledge and perspective that will occur during the novel.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ "I think we reminded them of what peace was like, we boys of sixteen...We were careless and wild, and I suppose we could be thought of as a sign of the life the war was being fought to preserve....Phineas was the essence of this careless peace."

Related Characters: Gene Forrester (speaker), Phineas ("Finny")

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 24



Explanation and Analysis


At the beginning of the novel's flashback, Gene and his best friend Phineas are sixteen-year-old students at Dover, who are busy engaging in reckless, spontaneous activities during their school's Summer Session -- all at Phineas' urging. Phineas, with his spontaneous attitudes, easy charm, and impressive athletic abilities, leads the other students in endeavors that often just cross the line and are not allowed or inappropriate. Although Phineas should be reprimanded, according to the prep school's regulations, faculty are more than likely to let one of Phineas's endeavors go unpunished, especially when Phineas provides a charismatic reason for his venture. From his mature perspective, Gene the narrator understands that the faculty allowed such behavior because it symbolized the less complicated, freer times before World War II broke out. Gene no longer views Phineas with such envy; instead of becoming subconsciously irritated that Phineas is allowed to break every rule, the elder, narrator-Gene now more sympathetically understands the broader social issues that inspire the faculty to such lenience. The contrast between sixteen-year-old Gene and the narrator suggests that Gene's envy and sense of rivalry might intensify as such favor continues.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☝ "To keep silent about this amazing happening deepened the shock for me. It made Finny seem too unusual for—not friendship, but too unusual for rivalry. And there were few relationships among us at Devon not based on rivalry."

Related Characters: Gene Forrester (speaker), Phineas ("Finny")

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

Phineas -- who was known as Finny to his friend Gene -- breaks a school record for 100 Yards Free Style (without practicing for this endeavor) while only Gene is watching him swim in the pool. Yet, Phineas does not want to add to his impressive list of athletic prizes by repeating this feat with a more public audience. He asks Gene to keep it "just between you and me," inspiring Gene to wonder about his friend's motives. Gene considers that Phineas might want to impress him, or that Phineas might simply be above rivalry. For an individual as competitive as sixteen-year-old Gene (and all his competitive, jealous peers at the Devon School), this must be a frustrating possibility. Phineas was not only one of the best students, but he seemed to live in a wholly separate existence above all of his peers.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝ "I found a single sustaining thought. The thought was, You and Phineas are even already. You are even in enmity. You are both coldly driving ahead for yourselves alone....I felt better. We were even after all, even in enmity. The deadly rivalry was on both sides after all."

Related Characters: Gene Forrester (speaker), Phineas ("Finny")

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

After Phineas beats the school record in the 100 Yard Free Style, he takes Gene to the beach and they stay there overnight. Gene barely arrives back at school in time for his

Trigonometry test in the morning, which becomes the first test which he flunks.

After this occurs, Gene believes he understands the motivation behind Phineas advocating such reckless activities all summer: Phineas is (supposedly) attempting to sabotage Gene's academic achievement at Devon. Gene takes this rationale as evidence for Phineas's competitiveness, and convinces himself that Phineas is just as competitive as Gene is. Therefore, Phineas and Gene are "even in enmity"; Phineas is just as morally questionable as Gene is. Although Gene is here stating that he and Phineas are equal, this thought underscores Gene's competitive spirit; he does not want to recognize the way that Phineas is morally superior to him and above his competitive, jealous perspective.

☝ "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."

Related Characters: Gene Forrester (speaker), Phineas ("Finny")

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 59


Explanation and Analysis

After Phineas announces that another student, Leper, will leap down the tree tonight, in order to join their club of reckless behavior (which Phineas dubbed the "Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session"), Gene finally tells Phineas that he does not wish to attend. After withholding his resentment and anger for so long, Gene angrily tells Phineas that he will "ruin my grade" if he goes tonight instead of studying. Phineas is "interested, surprised"; he had no idea that Gene felt that such endeavors would sacrifice his grades. So, Gene's theory (that Phineas invented such careless exploits in order to prevent Gene from studying) was completely false, and Gene must once again face the reality that Phineas seems oddly innocent and free from the jealousy that tortures Gene.

☞ "Holding firmly to the trunk, I took a step toward him, and then my knees bent and I jounced the limb. Finny, his balance gone, swung his head around to look at me for an instant with extreme interest, and then he tumbled sideways, broke through the little branches below and hit the bank with a sickening, unnatural thud. It was the first clumsy physical action I had ever seen him make. With unthinking sureness I moved out on the limb and jumped into the river, every trace of my fear of this forgotten."

Related Characters: Gene Forrester (speaker), Phineas ("Finny")

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 59-60

Explanation and Analysis


These small, seemingly insignificant physical movements -- bending a knee, swinging a head -- constitute the climax and narrative core of the entire novel. They do not conclusively establish Gene's guilt, but they certainly allow us to see why Gene might be guilty: his knees bent, but it was Gene himself ("I") who actually "jounced" the limb, causing Phineas to look at his best friend with "extreme interest" before a sickening fall. Phineas here makes the "first clumsy physical action" that Gene sees him make, reminding us of the way that Phineas's night beach adventure made Gene fail his first exam. It is noticeable that once Phineas falls, Gene finally jumps from the tree limb without fear; he almost seems to replace Phineas with this athletic action and new carefree attitude -- free from jealousy, that is. This already suggests that the idealized character of Phineas which has so affected the novel thus far, and brought the entire community at Devon under his charm, is already gone.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☞ "Across the hall...where Leper Lepellier had dreamed his way through July and August amid sunshine and dust motes and windows through which the ivy had reached tentatively into the room, here Brinker Hadley had established his headquarters. Emissaries were already dropping in to confer with him."

Related Characters: Gene Forrester (speaker), Brinker Hadley, Elwin "Leper" Lepellier

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

Now that Devon's first Summer Session has ended and fall has arrived (along with Phineas's own "fall"), the school which had been largely "leaderless" (and thus open to Phineas's whims, because the few faculty members who remained over the summer were lenient to him and students followed his example) has returned to its typical, hierarchical order. Students such as Brinker Hadley return to their usual positions of power, which Gene analogizes to martial positions of command. Here, Phineas is gone, and the carefree atmosphere which he fostered has left with him, replaced by the realities of growing up and the looming threat of World War II.

☞ "'Listen, pal, if I can't play sports, you're going to play them for me,' and 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."

Related Characters: Gene Forrester, Phineas ("Finny") (speaker)

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

After Phineas's fall, he still considers Gene a "pal," and his enduring absence of rivalry and jealousy is revealed when Phineas encourages Gene to play sports "for him." With these words, Phineas almost seems to advocate that Gene should take his place -- a sentiment that Gene latches onto as well. Of course, the bookish, less-athletic Gene cannot truly act in Phineas's stead. He can, however, feel that same "soaring sense of freedom" that threaded all of Phineas's actions. Gene takes some comfort in the thought that his "purpose" was to replace Phineas, subsuming his own identity into that of the friend he so loves and hates. Throughout the novel, Gene questions his own motivations during the fateful tree scene. Did Gene intend to have such a malicious consequence of his actions, or was his behavior accidental? These are the sorts of possibilities soldiers on the spontaneous, frenetic environment of the battlefield


encounter as well -- where a single movement or a single confused second can have life-changing consequences.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☞ "In the same way the war, beginning almost humorously with announcements about [no more] maids and days spent at apple-picking, commenced its invasion of the school."

Related Characters: Gene Forrester (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

With this description of the way that World War II presented itself at Devon, Gene alludes to the emotional complications that pervade the novel. Close friendships are rife with guilt and malicious intentions; violent wars are painted over by humor. Although schoolboys should be interacting with playful, easy friendships, at Devon the intrinsic rivalry seems to make the sentiments of war exist at home. Likewise, the separation between New England and the battlefields of World War II allows the war to become a mere diversion from the violence between the school boys, an "invasion" which lacks the emotional connotations that an invasion, particularly one associated with such violence, should by definition have.

☞ "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....The war would be deadly all right. But I was used to finding something deadly in things that attracted me."

Related Characters: Gene Forrester (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

As the protagonist of a novel so embittered by the struggles of identity -- the uncertainties of separating your actions from your intention, the difficulties of remaining a cohesive character while you are growing and realizing your intrinsic flaws and competitive spirit -- Gene finds the anonymity of

the soldier to be an alluring prospect. Yet he also finds the danger of the martial life to be appealing, and he reflects that this is nothing unusual for his character -- he reacts to war in the same way that he reacts to everything else, particularly his relationship to Phineas. This indicates that war, like other competitive places such as a prep school, is a phenomenon which reveals one's inner character.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☞ "So the war swept over like a wave at the seashore, gathering power and size as it bore on us, overwhelming in its rush, seemingly inescapable, and then at the last moment eluded by a word from Phineas; I had simply ducked, that was all, and the wave's concentrated power had hurtled harmlessly overhead."

Related Characters: Gene Forrester (speaker), Phineas ("Finny")

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 109



Explanation and Analysis

Gene has just had an invigorating day, shoveling snow off the railroads along with other classmates and viewing a train of men dressed for war pass by thanks to his work. Inspired by his classmate Brinker's passion for enlisting, and the night sky which is pulsing overhead with possibilities, Gene decides to enlist, to spontaneously join the communal war effort and remake his life. Yet, when he returns, he finds Phineas -- the constant reminder of his prior transgressions and confused identity -- in his bedroom. Phineas is dazed and surprised, and he clearly hopes that Gene will not enlist and leave him. So because of Phineas, Gene's quixotic, momentary dream of becoming a soldier and leaving his life as a student behind becomes an impossibility. The powerful possibilities of enlisting pass Gene by in an unsettling way, though he also realizes that the war cannot be avoided forever.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☞ "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."

Related Characters: Gene Forrester (speaker), Phineas ("Finny"), Brinker Hadley, Brownie Perkins

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 136-137



Explanation and Analysis

During one Saturday afternoon, which is typically the most lonesome time at a boys' school such as Dover, according to Gene, Gene and his classmates hold a winter carnival (inspired by Phineas, whose stream of ideas has been slower of late). Stimulated by cider, a general awareness that they may be breaking school rules, and the fact that they are definitely creating a fictitious celebration, they engage in revelry, making a sort of "momentary, illusory, special and separate peace." We know that this peace specifically contrasts with the harsh reality of World War II, because this carnival ends when Gene receives a letter from Leper, who was the first boy at Devon to enlist in the war. Leper's tense, terse note begs Gene to visit him at his "Christmas location" (without giving a genuine address or a genuine reason), returning the narrative to the cold realism of the winter of 1943.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☞☞ "Fear seized my stomach like a cramp. I didn't care what I said to him now; it was myself I was worried about. For if Leper was psycho it was the army which had done it to him, and I and all of us were on the brink of the army."

Related Characters: Gene Forrester (speaker), Elwin "Leper" Lepellier

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 144


Explanation and Analysis

Gene visits Leper as he had requested in his note, but he does not necessarily respond to Leper's condition with the sympathy we would expect in a friend as visitor. Rather, to Gene, Leper's plight is a larger commentary on societal forces beyond one's control. For Gene, Leper's internal, individual pain is not the concern. Instead, he is more troubled by the amorphous entity of War that has the power to have made Leper so disturbed. Leper's plight makes Gene fear how the war will affect him and his friends, rather than make him feel any special sympathy for Leper as an individual product of the war.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☞☞ "'You'd get things so scrambled up nobody would know who to fight any more. You'd make a mess, a terrible mess, Finny, out of the war.'"

Related Characters: Gene Forrester (speaker), Phineas ("Finny")

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

As the boys hold a makeshift court session to investigate the cause of Phineas's fall from the tree, Phineas grows agitated and storms out, down the hall and falling down the marble stairs, from where all of the boys involved in the meeting can hear his accident. When Gene visits Phineas afterwards, Phineas says he cannot mentally take being an invalid while there's a war on -- living in "separate peace" because he cannot serve his country. Gene, however, rightly tells Phineas that he would "make a mess out of the war": because of his inherent goodness, Phineas would likely engage in behaviors as nonsensical as befriending the enemy.

With this characterization, Gene implies that school boys who engage in petty rivalries would be good at the war, used to feelings of guilt and skilled at the task of ruining others' lives. It's boys like Phineas (or, in another sense, Leper), who exist apart from petty jealousy and competition, who would be destroyed by the war and make a "terrible mess" of things.

☞☞ "I could not escape a feeling that this was my own funeral, and you do not cry in that case."

Related Characters: Gene Forrester (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

Phineas dies from a bit of bone marrow making its way to his heart during the surgery to reset his broken bone. Upon learning of the tragedy, Gene does not cry for his friend. Gene does not even cry at Phineas's funeral -- especially because he feels as if this funeral is his own.

Gene might still feel as if he is replacing Phineas, or has lost himself in Phineas's identity -- a possibility which provided


him with some comfort earlier in the novel -- but it is more likely that this emotion actually stems from Gene's more negative feelings -- his guilt, his self-understanding, his internal emptiness. Gene does not entirely describe the reasons for his lack of tears, which further suggests that he is a broken individual, whose faults are painful to recognize, even to himself.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☝☝ "I never killed anybody and I never developed an intense level of hatred for the enemy. Because my war ended before I ever put on a uniform; I was on active duty all my time at school; I killed my enemy there. Only Phineas never was afraid, only Phineas never hated anyone."

Related Characters: Gene Forrester (speaker), Phineas ("Finny")

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

As the novel comes to a close, Gene cements the way this narrative connects petty schoolboy jealousies with the antagonisms of war: it treats them as the same phenomenon, the same manifestation of intrinsic human failings. Soldiers who have their fear and hatred translated into death and destruction are merely schoolboys who have become a few years older, and have been given deadlier weapons and a vague cause to kill and die for. Gene also finally defines Phineas here, after he has refused to define his friendship throughout the novel (most noticeably when Phineas calls him his "best pal" by the beach). Phineas was the "enemy" to Gene -- as other soldiers are the "enemy" at war. Phineas is the only being truly separate from intrinsic human selfishness -- a selfishness Gene attributes to himself and all others.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Gene Forrester, a man in his mid thirties, describes his return visit to the private prep school he attended, the Devon School, in New Hampshire fifteen years earlier. There are two important places that Gene most wants to see. First he visits the "First Academy Building," one of the school's main buildings. Once inside, he feels older, taller, and more secure than he did as a student.

As Gene looks around the building, he observes that it looks almost exactly the same as it used to. He observes that because it hasn't changed in 160 years, the Devon School allows past and present to mingle harmoniously.

Gene's next important stop is a tree by a river. The tree still has a branch hanging over the river, but it looks smaller to him than it used to. Gene thinks to himself: the more things stay the same, the more they change. He finds this comforting, and describes himself "changed."

The story shifts to the distant past, with Gene recalling the Devon summer session of 1942, when he was sixteen and World War II was in full swing. Gene refers to it as his "sarcastic" summer.

Gene stands near a giant tree by a river with his best friend, Phineas ("Finny"), and three friends: Elwin "Leper" Lepellier, Chet Douglass, and Bobby Zane. Finny is about to jump from the tree branch hanging near the river, a physical test no boy his age has ever attempted. It's part of the fitness test that seniors at Devon have to pass before graduating. Finny refers to the jump as his "contribution to the war effort."

Finny climbs the tree and jumps. Gene is next. He climbs the tree. Though he's terrified, thinks jumping is stupid, and wonders if Finny may have gotten "some kind of hold" on him, Gene jumps. The other boys all refuse to jump. Finny tells Gene, "It's me and you, pal."

Gene's return to his prep school allows him to confront his adolescent past from a grown-up perspective. One change: as an adult he feels more secure with who he is than he did as a student.



Gene sees the Devon School's continuity as providing a harmonious relation with the past. The implication is that he doesn't feel that same harmony.



The tree, which hasn't changed, also isn't as big as Gene remembered it. The difference in his perception shows him how much he's changed, and seems to free him from a past that haunted him.



As the world went to war, sarcasm, a classic teenage tool, became a way for Gene to deny his fear of the war.



Finny's desire to jump from the tree despite his young age is the first hint of his immense athletic skill and adventurous spirit. Finny is also clearly the leader of the group. His comment about the "war effort" is not sarcastic; he conceives of war as just another game.



Gene jumps because Finny did, and his sense of rivalry makes him fear Finny has some kind of hold over him, over his identity. Finny, meanwhile, thinks they're just friends.



As the five boys walk back to dinner, Finny says that Gene did well after being "shamed" into it, and then makes fun of Gene for being so careful to arrive at dinner on time. Gene tackles Finny. They wrestle, and end up so late for dinner they decide to skip it. They go to their dorm room, do their homework, and go to sleep.

Gene and Finny have a real friendship. But Finny, comfortable in his athletic perfection, has no sense that his jokes actually hurt Gene. Gene, meanwhile, tackles Finny partly in fun and partly because the jokes anger him. It shames him that they're accurate.



CHAPTER 2

Mr. Prud'homme, a substitute teacher at Devon for the summer, shows up at Finny and Gene's room the next morning to punish them for missing dinner. Finny tells him about their adventures and explains that they had to jump out of the giant tree by the river as part of their preparation for war. Mr. Prud'homme laughs and leaves without disciplining them.

Finny's charm and sense of self get him out of all trouble, rendering all of Gene's worry about rules and regulations worthless.



Gene describes Finny as a unique boy, who somehow was good and kind and also a rule breaker. Gene also thinks the faculty looked fondly on Finny and the rest of the students in their year because they reminded the adults of what peace was like. He describes Finny as the ultimate example of the "careless peace" of youth, even though Finny himself celebrates the war by wearing wild shirts.

Finny is a leader, and someone whom Gene admires and wants to be like. The faculty's sense of war as dreadful contrasts totally with Finny's sense of it as thrilling: the understanding of adults vs. the naïve excitement of youth.



Finny and Gene go to a tea party given by Mr. Patch-Withers, the Devon summer substitute Headmaster. Mr. Patch-Withers's wife notices that Finny is wearing a Devon school tie as a belt. Finny gives an elaborate explanation that gets him out of trouble. Gene is embarrassed that he feels slightly disappointed Finny didn't get punished.

Gene envies Finny's ability to get away with breaking rules. This envy embarrasses him and makes him feel like a bad person. It's the beginning of a sense Gene has that Finny affects him too much.



After the party, Finny and Gene head to the river. On they way they discuss the war in Europe, which feels distant and unbelievable to them. At the river, Finny asks if Gene is still afraid to jump. When Gene says he isn't, Finny proposes they form a club to make their partnership official. They name it the "Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session" and make jumping out of the tree an initiation rite.

Finny's assured sense of self, fed by athletic prowess, makes him blind to the feelings of others. While Finny thinks he and Gene are solidifying their friendship, he doesn't realize Gene's resentment of his questions. Not that this really excuses Gene's resentment of his friend.



Gene and Finny climb the tree. Gene delays for a second, and almost loses his balance. Finny stabilizes him. Later, Gene realizes Finny may have saved his life.

Finny saves his buddy's life. It's a sign of Finny's superior athletic skill and ironically foreshadows what Gene will later do to Finny.



CHAPTER 3

As he thinks about Finny saving him in the tree, it occurs to Gene that it was Finny's fault he was in the tree in the first place. He decides that the two cancel out.

Saving Gene's life should have won Finny Gene's eternal gratitude. Instead, Gene's jealousy makes him resent Finny.



Finny and Gene ask six friends to join their society. Finny proclaims that every one of their nightly meetings will begin with a leap from the tree. The leap never ceases to terrify Gene, but he doesn't voice his annoyance.

Even as the boys form their society and enjoy life, Gene's fear in contrast to Finny's carefree attitude eats at him.



Finny hates the Devon summer athletics program. When he finds a medicine ball on the fields where the seniors do calisthenics in preparation for joining the army, he invents "blitzball" (named after "blitzkrieg"): a game in which everyone tried to knock down the ball carrier, and when there was a new ball carrier everyone tried to knock *him* down.

Just as he reinvents the senior fitness test tree jump, Finny transforms the war-bound seniors' ball into a popular sports game. Sports are Finny's version of war, pure fun in which there are no winners or losers.



Blitzball soon becomes popular. Finny is, of course, the best at it, just as he's the best at socializing with other students and charming the Devon faculty.

Gene's admiring depictions of Finny nearly always have an underlying tinge of envy.



As narrator, Gene says that every person has a moment in history that defines, or even freezes, his or her life. He explains that World War II was his life-defining time.

Gene conveys how completely World War II shaped his identity.



One day, Finny and Gene go swimming in the Devon pool. Finny decides he wants to break the school record, and succeeds on his first try. Gene wants to tell everyone, but Finny makes him promise not to. Gene thinks that this makes Finny "too unusual for rivalry."

Gene craves the approval of others, but Finny doesn't. Finny's achievements and his ability to brush those achievements off make Gene not just jealous, but aware he isn't in Finny's league.



Finny then says that real swimming must be done in the ocean. He proposes that they go to the beach, a bike ride of a few hours. Though the trip breaks school rules and therefore makes Gene nervous, he agrees to go.

Finny's unfettered spontaneity contrasts with Gene's cautious approach to life. Yet Gene admires Finny too much to ever say no to him, and hates this fact too.



At the beach, Finny and Gene play in the waves. But after a big wave overpowers him, Gene returns to the beach. Finny frolics in the waves for an hour alone.

Gene hates anything that is more powerful than him, whether a wave or Finny.



Afterward they walk the boardwalk, eat hotdogs, and get a beer at a local bar using fake military draft cards.

The fake draft cards highlight their youth and lack of seriousness about the war.



As they settle down to sleep among the dunes, Finny tells Gene that he is his "best pal." Gene begins to agree, but can't bring himself to say the words.

Finny's feelings for Gene are genuine, but Gene's feelings toward Finny have been corrupted by jealousy.



CHAPTER 4

Back at school after the night at the beach, Gene flunks his trigonometry test. Later that night, Finny tells Gene that he works too hard and that he's probably trying to be the class valedictorian. Gene asks how Finny would feel if he, Gene, were valedictorian. Finny jokes that he'd kill himself out of envy. Gene thinks this joke is hiding a real truth beneath.

Gene now senses that he and Finny are equal in their hatred of each other's successes: he envies Finny's athletic prowess and social charms, while Finny envies his academic success. He thinks their relationship has become a "deadly rivalry" and starts to suspect that all of the activities Finny comes up with are designed to sabotage his academic success.

Gene intensifies his studying, and soon passes Chet Douglass as the best student in the school, on par with Finny's rank as Devon's leading athlete. Yet despite this rivalry, the two of them get along as well as ever.

Gene also mentions his trip to the beach with Finny to Mr. Prud'homme, and is surprised when the teacher doesn't care that they broke the rules.

Then, one night as Gene is studying, Finny barges in to announce that Leper Lepellier has agreed to jump from the tree. Gene thinks Finny's trying to distract him. He starts walking toward the tree, but angrily says it's going to hurt his grade. Finny, not at all angry, responds that it's just a game, and shouldn't come if he doesn't want to. Finny then says how much he admires Gene's intelligence and his seriousness about academics.

Gene is in shock. As he and Finny walk over to watch Leper jump, Gene realizes Finny never felt any rivalry at all. He also realizes that this means that Finny is his moral superior.

At the tree, Finny proposes they start with a simultaneous jump. Gene and Finny climb the tree, but while on the branch Gene's knees bend. The branch bounces. Finny falls to the riverbank. Gene dives into the water feeling no fear.

Gene begins to interpret his own feelings of envy toward Finny as Finny having feelings of envy for him. He's mixing up his own feelings with Finny's feelings, and in the process imagines a rivalry that doesn't exist.



At the pool, Gene realized Finny was out of his league. By now imagining there is a rivalry, he gets feel once more to feel he's Finny's equal. A neat trick, except that it makes him hate his best friend.



The boys get along as well as ever because there is no rivalry: it's all in Gene's mind. Gene the thirty-year-old narrator knows this, and his writing is full of irony.



Gene even tries to get Finny into trouble.



For the first time, Gene lets his jealous anger show. And Finny responds not with anger, but with kindness and an expression of genuine admiration for Gene's talents. Rivalry over, right?



But because Gene defines himself against Finny, Finny's moral superiority destroys Gene's sense of self, making him more jealous.



Earlier, Finny stopped Gene from falling. Now, jealousy pushes Gene to harm his best friend. And with his "enemy" gone, Gene ceases to feel any fear of the jump.



CHAPTER 5

The fall shatters Finny's leg. No one is allowed to visit him in the infirmary. Though no one suspects Gene did anything wrong, he questions whether he purposely made Finny fall. To make himself feel better, he dresses up one day in Finny's clothes. He feels relief when he looks in the mirror. He says "I was Phineas," and is happy that he'd never have to "stumble through the confusions of [his] own character again." By the morning the feeling is gone.

That morning, Gene runs into Dr. Stanpole, the school physician. He says Finny is improving, but that he'll never play sports again. Gene starts crying. The doctor tells him to be strong, and says that Finny requested to see Gene in person.

As he goes to the infirmary, Gene thinks Finny wants to accuse him of causing his fall. In the infirmary, Finny is propped up in bed, in a cast, with a tube inserted in his arm.

Gene asks Finny what he remembers. Finny says he lost his balance and tried to reach Gene but couldn't. Gene is furious and asks whether Finny meant to pull Gene down with him? But Finny says he was just trying not to fall.

Gene asks what made Finny lose his balance. Finny then says he suspects he didn't lose his balance for no reason, but then apologizes for even implying Gene might have caused his fall.

Gene realizes that his earlier thoughts about their rivalry were "ludicrous," and realizes that, if he were in Gene's situation, Finny would confess. He starts to confess, but just then Dr. Stanpole enters. The summer session ends without Gene and Finny seeing each other again.

On his return trip to Devon for the fall semester, Gene stops at Finny's house. Finny is propped on pillows, a shadow of the athlete that he was at Devon before his fall.

After some small talk, Gene tells Finny that he was responsible for Finny falling from the tree. Finny refuses to believe it. Gene realizes that telling Finny the truth only causes more pain, and backs off. They agree to see each other when Finny returns to Devon at Thanksgiving.

Gene bounced Finny from the branch because Finny was a threat to his identity. He had defined himself as Finny's rival and equal, and then discovered that he wasn't. But because Gene's sense of himself is entirely wrapped up in Finny, it's only when he dresses as Finny, becomes Finny, that he feels comforted.



The fact that Finny can't play sports hammers home to Gene the enormity of what he's done. It also symbolizes the loss of youthful perfection.



Just as Gene's envy blinded him before, now his guilt does. Finny in the infirmary resembles an injured soldier.



Rather than confess, Gene acts cowardly: he checks what Finny remembers, and even accuses Finny of trying to hurt him! Gene's still competing with Finny.



Finny does suspect Gene, but can't bear to face it. This is a mark of Finny's unique goodness.



The summer was a time of innocence when the boys didn't have to face enlisting in the war. Finny's athletic daring embodied that innocence. Both end together.



Gene's jealousy has robbed Finny of his identity as an athlete.



It's no surprise that Finny rejects Gene's confession. Finny cannot comprehend that a friend would harm him because he never would harm a friend.



Finny asks Gene if he's going to start playing by the rules now. Gene says he won't play by the rules, but knows that he's lying.

Finny is trying to preserve their youthful innocence. Gene's lie betrays it.



CHAPTER 6

At the first chapel service of the year, Gene observes that though the campus looks the same, the calm ease of the summer session is over: Devon has returned to its strict rules and discipline.

The more things stay the same, the more they change. The school looks the same, but the innocence of summer, and Finny, is gone.



Gene decides that breaking rules means being broken by them in the end. He thinks of Finny and concludes that rule breakers will always end up broken and reformed by society.

Instead of admitting he broke Finny, Gene hides behind some abstract greater power that punishes rule breakers.



Gene lives in the same room he shared with Finny, but Finny's place has not been taken, so Gene lives alone. But a prominent student on campus named Brinker Hadley has replaced Leper, his neighbor from the summer.

Through his actions, Gene has "freed" himself of Finny. The change from the dreamy Leper to the impressive Brinker is another indication of lost summer innocence.



That afternoon, Gene walks to Devon's Crew House to report for his job as assistant senior crew manager. As he passes the Devon River he thinks of Finny performing a favorite stunt: balancing on the end of a canoe. He describes it as "perfection."

Gene thinks of Finny without jealousy only after the athletic grace he envied in Finny is gone.



At the boathouse, Gene meets Cliff Quackenbush, the crew manager, who most students at Devon dislike. After practice, Quackenbush demands to know why Gene is working as an assistant manager when he's a senior and will never get to be a manager. Quackenbush calls Gene a "maimed son-of-a-bitch," implying Gene is assistant manager only because he can't row. Gene hits Quackenbush in the face. They fight, eventually tumbling into the river.

Quackenbush is an insecure bully, but he's also right. Why did Gene become assistant manager? By attacking Quackenbush for calling him maimed, Gene provides a partial answer: he's avoiding sports because of Finny, who's athletic career Gene destroyed. Gene still feels his identity is tied up with Finny's.



On the walk back to his dorm, Gene runs into Mr. Ludsbury, the man in charge of his dormitory. Mr. Ludsbury scolds Gene for taking advantage of Mr. Prud'homme in the summer and says that now things will return to order.

Ludsbury confirms Gene's observation: the end of summer session is the end of peace and innocence. With Finny absent, law and order returns.



Mr. Ludsbury then tells Gene he got a phone call. Gene calls back. It's Finny, who's relieved that no one has taken his spot as Gene's roommate.

Finny's feelings for Gene remain uncomplicated.



But Finny can't understand why Gene would want to be a crew team manager. Gene silently comments that he wants to be assistant manager because he no longer feels he should play sports. But when Finny insists Gene has to play sports for Finny, it makes Gene realize now he has a chance to be part of Finny.

It's a continued desire to be like Finny that stops Gene from playing sports. Now Finny gives Gene a chance to be Finny, to take his athletic place.



CHAPTER 7

Back at his room, Gene is visited by Brinker. Brinker admires Gene's room, and jokes that Gene purposely injured Finny to get it all to himself. Gene defends himself, then changes the subject and suggests they go smoke.

Brinker's macho joking hits Gene where it hurts. He's the first to link Gene to Finny's fall, foreshadowing future events.



In the Butt Room, where they go to smoke, Brinker continues to joke in front of the other smoking students. Gene now plays along, confessing to the crime, but stops in the middle of describing how he knocked Finny from the branch. When another boy suggests Gene just pushed Finny off, Gene ridicules him to take the focus off himself. He then goes back to study without having smoked.

Gene's treatment of the boy in the Butt room is a classic tactic of people's private wars against invented enemies: Gene makes the boy his enemy in order to defeat him, and make himself strong. Of course, the result is that Gene has an enemy he didn't have before.



Fall turns into winter and the first snow blankets Devon. Gene observes that the war has also begun to take over the school: he and other students have to do jobs like apple picking and snow shoveling. The normal workers are all too busy with the war effort.

The change of seasons brings a change of consciousness to Devon: the war becomes more real for Gene and his friends. Now it directly affects them.



On the way to help shovel the snow-covered railroad tracks along which troop transport trains ride, Gene meets Leper. Leper is on skis and is "touring" the area looking for a beaver dam. Gene, Brinker, Chet Douglass, and Quackenbush then spend a miserable day shoveling. They cheer when at the end of the day a train full of soldiers rolls along the tracks they've cleared. The soldiers make them feel like boys.

While Leper is a dreamer, ignorant of war, the other boys are excited by it. But, because they're still just kids, they don't know that, at best, being a soldier will be more similar to the misery of shoveling snow than to their dreams of valor and glory.



They meet Leper on the way home. He reports excitedly that he found the beaver dam. Brinker mocks Leper, and disdainfully calls him an "abominable snowman" and a "nat-u-ral-ist."

Brinker and Leper have adopted different stances to the war. Brinker has fashioned himself as a war-ready grown-up. Leper ignores the war, almost hides from it.



Brinker then tells Gene he wants to enlist in the armed forces tomorrow. Gene considers enlisting himself. Once he realizes that the peace of the summer will never return to Devon and that in the army he'll "owe no one anything," he decides to do it. When he gets back to his room, Finny is there.

Gene views enlistment as a clean slate, a new identity. The possibility of "owing] no one anything" is enticing particularly because of his concerns about owing so much to Finny.



CHAPTER 8

Finny immediately mocks Gene's shoveling work clothes, and complains that the school no longer has maids. Gene's explanation that the war justifies scaling back luxuries doesn't satisfy Finny.

The next morning, Brinker enters. When he sees Finny, he starts to joke about Gene offering Finny to get the room, but Gene quickly changes the subject to their imminent enlistment. Finny is horrified, and Gene decides that, in fact, he won't enlist. Soon he and Finny are making fun of Brinker's enlistment plans.

As Finny and Gene walk around the wintry Devon campus, Finny says that winter must love him, since he loves it. Gene silently thinks that Finny's idea of reciprocal love has been proven false by experience, but that it should be true.

Finny suggests that they cut class and go see the gym. Walking to the gym makes Finny out of breath, and Gene realizes the toll that Finny's injury truly has taken on him.

In the locker room, Finny again asks Gene what sports he's gone out for. Gene says none because sports seem trivial during wartime. Finny rejects this notion, and describes the entire war as a fake. He says the war was invented by old men who want to stop young people from enjoying themselves, just as the Great Depression was used to wipe out the revelry of the Roaring Twenties.

Gene asks what makes Finny "so special" that he can see this conspiracy while everyone else believes in the war. Finny blurts that his understanding comes from having suffered. Finny's claim shocks them both.

Gene breaks the awkward silence that follows Finny's outburst by doing chin-ups. Finny encourages him to do thirty, then says he once had the goal of making the Olympics. He resolves to train Gene to qualify for 1944 Games. Gene agrees.

Over the following months, Gene tutors Finny in academic subjects and Finny helps Gene become a stronger runner.

Finny hates how the war has changed the school. It has destroyed the innocent paradise of the summer.



Before he was injured Finny saw the war as distant, unreal fun and games. Now that it's affecting him he reacts against it. Is this an extension of his earlier position, or a change?



Finny's reciprocal love idea captures both his innocence and his self-contained blindness toward other people: he just assumes everything and everyone thinks just like him.



Though Finny seems to remain his same optimistic self, his body has clearly changed and betrayed him.



Finny describes the war, in essence, as a War Against Youth, and places himself in direct opposition to it, going so far as to claim it doesn't exist. Finny therefore casts himself in the role of preserving Youth, Innocence, and Fun against this false menace.



But Finny's outburst shows he has some bitterness. Finny's ability to hold off reality through force of will is weakening.



In the first half of the novel, innocent Finny invented "blitzball" a warlike sport without killing or victory. Now he uses sports, through Gene, as a way to hide from the war.



Gene and Finny begin to really switch identities, which is what Gene always wanted.



One day while training Gene feels stronger and freer than before.

Mr. Ludsbury notices him training and tells them to remember that all athletic training is preparation for the war. Finny responds: "No." The reply startles Mr. Ludsbury, who walks away muttering. Finny comments to Gene that Ludsbury must be too thin to be let in on the old fat men's conspiracy. Gene pities Ludsbury.

CHAPTER 9

Through his training and friendship with Finny, Gene has a newfound inner peace, though he comments as the narrator that this sense of peace was "deceiving."

In January, to everyone's shock, Leper Lepellier enlists after watching a video about mountain commandos who travel on skis. Leper says he believes that war is good for the human race, a test of evolutionary progress.

Leper leaves school one week later. To Brinker and most of the other boys, Leper's participation in the war becomes a running joke: they claim he was behind every allied victory. Finny, though, refuses to take part in these jokes, and slowly pulls Gene into spending all of his time training for the Olympics.

One bleak winter Saturday, Finny proposes the boys hold "The Devon Winter Carnival." With Gene, he assembles a crew of collaborators, including Brinker and his roommate Brownie Perkins. They drink hard cider and award prizes for athletic feats and the building of snow statues. Finny even gets up on the table and performs a dance that Gene calls a "choreography of peace" with his one good leg. In all, the carnival is a tremendous success. Gene describes it as their "momentary, illusory, special, and separate peace."

But as the carnival is going on, Brownie brings Gene a telegram. It's from Leper, who says he's escaped from the military and needs Gene to come visit him immediately at his "Christmas location."

Perfection in athletics provides freedom.



Ludsbury, of the older generation, thinks all actions should be seen in terms of the war effort. Finny rejects such a view. Gene now so idealizes Finny that he accepts his view outright, without thought.



The focus on athletics keeps Gene from thinking either about himself or the war.



Leper justifies his sudden enlistment by referring to biology, a subject he loves in school. Was he also motivated by Brinker's mockery?



The boys' jokes show their understanding is still childish, while Finny continues to ignore the war completely. The question Gene never considers is whether Finny is using athletics to make him, Gene, ignore the war too.



Finny regains his identity and his leadership role among the boys, and through the carnival creates a tribute to innocent youth, defying war and change. Finny's dance celebrates the victory of peace over war and envy.



But the war is real and inescapable, and Leper and the innocence Leper represents have clearly not done well confronting it.



CHAPTER 10

Leper's "Christmas location" turns out to mean his home in Vermont. Gene takes a train there. Gene comments that this late-night train trip was the first of many he would take across the country that year shuttling among army bases, which was the extent of his military service during the War.

Gene hopes that when Leper said in his letter that he had escaped he meant that he had escaped from spies, not deserted the army. But when he arrives he quickly learns that Leper did desert in order to avoid facing a Section Eight discharge, which the army gives to the insane. Leper felt that if he received such a discharge he would never be able to live a normal life.

Leper then starts claiming that "they" have brainwashed Gene. When Gene resists this idea, Leper says that he always knew but now can admit it to himself: Gene was a good guy on the outside, but a "savage underneath." Leper says he knows Gene pushed Finny out of the tree. Gene, furious, kicks over Leper's chair.

Leper's mother rushes in to investigate the noise. Gene tries to excuse himself, but Leper invites him to lunch and Gene stays out of guilt. He then goes for a walk with Leper afterward.

During the walk, Gene comments that Brinker has changed a great deal, becoming much less cruel. Leper responds that he'd recognize the "bastard" even if he turned into Snow White, but the image of Brinker's head having the face of Snow White sends Leper into a sobbing fit. Hallucinations of his corporal's face turning into a woman's, and of more dreadful things, are what caused him to face a Section Eight discharge in the first place.

Gene begs Leper to stop talking, but Leper either won't or can't. Soon Gene can't bear it any more. He runs away into the snow-covered fields.

CHAPTER 11

Back at Devon, Gene finds Finny in the middle of a snowball fight with a bunch of other students. A few hours later, Gene asks Finny if it's okay for Finny to play around that way on his bad leg. Finny responds that when his leg heals it will be stronger than before.

Gene's flashback reveals that he did indeed enlist and join the war effort. It's also foreshadowing, linking the war and enlistment to whatever happens at Leper's house.



Leper entered the war with only an idealistic sense of what it would be like. The reality, it now seems, might have driven him insane. Leper's fear about returning to civilian life represents all soldiers' fears and troubles returning to society after war.



The army has made Leper grow up, though in the process it damaged him: he can admit painful things to himself now, though they make him crazy. He can see Gene's savagery now, while Finny still refuses to.



Leper's mother's intervention underscores how young the boys still are.



Leper's insanity is a fear of things transforming, of things changing. It is a fear of growing up. When children look at the world it makes sense. But as they grow into adulthood, their idealism about the world is stripped away, and it ceases to make sense or be beautiful.



Gene, still a child, can't bear to face the horror of war and adulthood, so he runs.



Finny is still innocent and optimistic; the snowball fight is another childish version of war. Leper used to be this way, but the adult world crushed him. Gene has become cautious again.



Gene returns to his room and takes down some photos he had pasted up that were of a southern plantation he had implied to others was his home. Now that he feels he's growing up, he takes the pictures down.

Finny and Gene are back in their room when Brinker comes in and asks about Leper. Gene is vague, but Brinker guesses that Leper has gone crazy and expresses his sympathy. He then says, sadly, that their class at Devon now has two students who can't help the war effort, meaning Leper and Finny.

At Gene's prodding, Finny says once again that there isn't really a war, but this time he says it ironically. Gene realizes that the war is real, that everything that had sustained them during the winter, such as training for the Olympics, is just a dreamlike escape from the truth. Gene resolves to become "careful and self-preserving."

As time passes, most of the boys other than Gene enlist. One morning, Brinker suggests that Gene is delaying enlisting because he feels pity for Finny, and because some details of the accident that need to be "cleared up." Gene denies Brinker's claim. Brinker says that the only person who truly knows what caused Finny's fall is Gene.

Back in the dorm, as Gene does Finny's Latin homework, Finny says he began to believe in the war once he heard that it had made Leper "crazy." He adds that Leper definitely is crazy. He saw him lurking in the bushes outside the Devon chapel that morning. They decide not to tell anyone about it.

Later that night, Brinker and three boys arrive at Gene and Finny's room. They all go to the Assembly Room, a large auditorium, in Devon's First Building. Brinker announces that they've gathered there to investigate Gene and to determine the truth behind the events of Finny's fall.

They question Finny, who says he just lost his balance and fell, and that Gene was at the bottom of the tree. Gene agrees with the story, but then Finny remembers that they were both on the branch about to do a double jump. Brinker wishes Leper were there to comment on the differences between Gene and Finny's story. Finny admits he saw Leper that morning go into the school doctor's office.

Gene feels that he no longer needs a false identity to prop him up. He feels he's gaining his own identity.



Brinker is intent on growing up, on facing reality, though he's no longer cruel about it. He just thinks it has to be done.



Once again Gene links his identity too closely to Finny's. When Finny admits the war is real, their shared "illusory" peace collapses. Gene's response is to become "careful and self-preserving," to act grown-up.



Brinker reveals that his early jokes about Gene purposely injuring Finny to get his room had some substance behind them. Here he suggests that guilt now binds Gene to Finny since Gene made Finny his dependent.



Finny's surrender to reality is a key shift in his identity and can be seen as the climax of the novel. Once Finny, the symbol and protector of innocence, acknowledges the war, the boys' fate is sealed.



The mock tribunal echoes the tribunals that took place after WW2. Both sought the source of people's actions in order to determine guilt. Another link between rivalry and war.



Finny starts by trying to hide from the truth. But just as Brinker hoped, the tribunal forces him to confront it. Yet Finny still can't bring himself to entirely admit what happened.



The boys get Leper. Leper calmly says that Gene and Finny were on the branch together when Finny fell. He says the two moved like a piston in an engine: one pushed down first (Gene) and then the other rose and fell (Finny). But when Brinker asks who shook the branch, Leper refuses to answer and starts to seem crazy again.

As the tribunal tries to calm Leper, Finny stands and says he doesn't care what happened. When Brinker protests that they need to get the facts straight, Finny swears and rushes from the room in tears.

The boys hear the taps of Finny's cane as he runs down the hallway, and then a crash as he trips and falls down the marble staircase.

Just as he can't face his hallucinations, Leper also refuses to face the truth.



Brinker tries to make Finny face "the facts", i.e. reality, but Finny tries to assert his innocence, to hide from reality...



...but this effort leads to disaster, just as Leper discovered. Hiding from reality doesn't make it go away.



CHAPTER 12

The boys stay calm. Brinker makes sure Finny doesn't move as boys get teachers and Dr. Stanpole to come to Finny's aid. Dr. Stanpole tells Gene that he thinks it's a simpler fracture that last time, and has Finny carried away to the infirmary in a chair. Gene wishes he could help, but knows it might make Finny angrier.

Gene sneaks to the infirmary and hides outside and imagines all the funny things Finny must be saying to Dr. Stanpole and Mr. Latham. Gene laughs so hard he cries.

When it's dark and the doctors have left, Gene crawls up to the window and opens. Finny furiously accuses Gene of coming to try and hurt him some more. Gene apologizes several times and leaves.

Gene aimlessly wanders the campus, like a "roaming ghost." He feels as if he no longer exists. He spends the night sleeping under the stadium.

The next morning, he finds a note in his room from Dr. Stanpole asking him to bring clothes for Finny. At the infirmary, Finny's hands shake as he sorts through his suitcase. He confesses that he's sent letters to all the armed services trying to enlist, but that none of them would take him because of his leg. The reason he denied the war existed was because he felt left out of it. Gene responds that Finny would have been a terrible soldier. He would have made everyone friends.

As the boy most suited to facing reality, Brinker takes charge. Finny's "simpler" break, also refers to the break between Finny and Gene. After the first fall it was complicated, full of denial. This time it won't be.



Gene continues to idealize Finny, to see him as a source of innocence.



Now without any athletic grace, Finny finally acknowledges Gene's jealous vengeful behavior toward him.



Gene feels nonexistent because he has destroyed a huge component of his identity: Finny.



Finny was denying the existence of the war because he couldn't be a part of it. He, too, could feel jealousy! Yet Gene's response points out that Finny wanted to be part of the war because he saw it from his innocent perspective. By being kept out of the war, Finny's innocence was preserved.



Finny starts crying, and says that Gene must not have known what he was doing when he shook the branch. Gene says it was a "crazy thing" inside him that made him do it. Finny says he understands and believes him. Then Dr. Stanpole tells Gene to return that evening after he has set Finny's bone.

Is Gene lying? Is Finny? It's not entirely clear. But by accepting each other's claims they preserve a childish innocence in their friendship.



When Gene returns to the infirmary, he is shocked to numbness when Dr. Stanpole tells him that Finny has died because some marrow from the break entered Finny's bloodstream during the operation.

Finny's death freezes him forever in his youth and peaceful innocence. Of course, Finny's dead, so he's frozen for Gene.



Gene never cries about Finny's death, not even at his funeral, because he feels as if it's his own funeral.

Finny's dead and Gene has what he always wanted: Finny's now a part of him.



CHAPTER 13

Gene and his friends graduate, and the school lets the military use part of its campus during the summer.

With Finny's innocent influence gone, the school itself becomes a military base...



As the soldiers drive in, Brinker brings Gene to meet his father, who can barely hide his disdain for Gene and Brinker's plans to enter the Navy and the Coast Guard, because neither is dangerous and therefore honorable enough. When his father is gone, Brinker apologizes, and denounces his father's generation for starting a war and making their children fight it.

... and all the boys enlist. But Brinker has been changed. His illusions about war have been stripped away. While refusing to hide from the war, he also now levels Finny's same criticisms against it.



Gene then goes to empty his locker. The locker room has been occupied by some of the soldiers from the Army at Devon for the summer. Gene watches them, and thinks he is ready for the war because he no longer has any hate.

Gene identifies peoples' fear of war and growing up as fear of their own hate, and implies that when people create enemies they are actually battling their own hate.



Gene says all the hatred he felt disappeared with Finny's death. He says only Finny was able to maintain a constant sense of confidence and affection as the world tumbled into war around him. Everyone else—Gene, Brinker, Leper, and Quackenbush—fell prey to the war in his own way, even though it was never clear who the enemy was or if there was an enemy at all.

Gene and his friends have made themselves men by turning people and things into enemies to be defeated. Their selves are then dependent on what they overcame. Only Finny, perfect in youth, never an adult, and always self-sufficient, escaped this sad fate.



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