**A Separate Peace** (a novel by John Knowles - Scribner, New York: 1959)

**NOTES**

1. **Setting**:

The work is set at Devon, a private boarding school in New Hampshire on the Atlantic Coast during World War II. Two rivers run through the school's campus, one is the Devon River (fresh water) and the other is the Naguamsett River (salt water, swamp like consistency). Some of the work's action revolves around a predominate oak tree overhanging a creek.

1. **Background Information**:

The novel begins with the main characters, Gene Forrester and Finny (Phineas), at Devon for a summer session. The school hopes that this session will allow the students to receive a diploma before they are drafted on their eighteenth birthday. Gene and Finny are roommates and friends at the school. Finny is a natural athlete who also acts as a leader for the other boys in the school; devising games like Blitzball, and organizing the Winter Carnival. However, Gene is more academically oriented in his interests and is jealous of Finny's natural ability in sports.

Shifting backward in time is a literary device called a **flashback**. Writers use flashbacks to achieve different purposes. For example, an author might flash back to a character’s past in order to provide background information or to help readers see the connection between a character’s past experiences and current thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

*A Separate Peace* has a **first-person narrator**—one who is a character in the novel as well as the storyteller, or “voice” that describes what happens. In general, this narrative point of view shortens the psychological distance between the storyteller and readers, creating the illusion that the narrator is speaking directly to them, friend to friends. Like real human beings, first-person narrators may be subject to errors in judgment. They may misinterpret the meaning of events, misunderstand other characters’ motivations, and lack the self-insight necessary to understand their own motivations. When you read a first-person narrative, be alert to the narrator’s limitations. Verify the accuracy of the narrator’s judgments by paying close attention to how the characters interact with the narrator and each other, to what the characters say about the narrator and each other, and to what the characters do.

The relationship between Finny and Gene is at the heart of *A Separate Peace.* Gene tells the reader about Finny’s attitudes and comments on them.

1. **Summary** <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/separate/summary.html>

Gene Forrester is a quiet, intellectual student at the Devon School in New Hampshire. During the summer session of 1942, he becomes close friends with his daredevil roommate Finny, whose innate charisma consistently allows him to get away with mischief. Finny prods Gene into making a dangerous jump out of a tree into a river, and the two start a secret society based on this ritual. Gene gradually begins to envy Finny’s astonishing athletic abilities, manifested in Finny’s breaking a school swimming record on his first try. He thinks that Finny, in turn, envies his superior academic achievements, and he suspects that his friend has been taking steps to distract him from his studies. Gene’s suspicions transform into resentful hatred, but he nevertheless carefully maintains an appearance of friendship.

Gene realizes that he has been grievously mistaken about the existence of any rivalry between them when, one day, Finny expresses a sincere desire to see Gene succeed. While still in a state of shock from the force of his realization, he accompanies Finny to the tree for their jumping ritual. When Finny reaches the edge of the branch, Gene’s knees bend, shaking the branch and causing Finny to fall to the bank and shatter his leg. The tragedy is generally considered an accident, and no one thinks to blame Gene—especially not Finny. But when the doctor tells Gene that Finny’s athletic days are over, Gene feels a piercing sense of guilt. He goes to see Finny and begins to admit his part in Finny’s fall, but the doctor interrupts him, and Finny is sent home before Gene gets another chance to confess.

The summer session ends, and Gene goes home to the South for a brief vacation. On his way back to school, he stops by Finny’s house and explains to his friend that he shook the branch on purpose. Finny refuses to listen to him, and Gene rescinds his confession and continues on to school. There, Gene attempts to avoid true athletic activity by becoming assistant manager of the crew team, but he feuds with the crew manager and quits. World War II is in full swing and the boys at Devon are all eager to enlist in the military. Brinker Hadley, a prominent class politician, suggests to Gene that they enlist together, and Gene agrees. That night, however, he finds Finny has returned to school. He consequently abandons his plans to enlist, as does Brinker. Finny expects Gene to take his place as the school’s sports star now that he is injured. When Gene protests that sports no longer seem important in the midst of the war, Finny declares that the war is nothing but a conspiracy to keep young men from eclipsing the older authorities.

Finny tells Gene that he once had aspirations to go to the Olympics, and Gene agrees to train for the 1944 Olympics in his place. All the boys are surprised when a gentle, nature-loving boy named Leper Lepellier becomes the first one in their class to enlist. Gene and Finny go on training, shielded within their private vision of world events. During a winter carnival, which Finny has organized, a telegram arrives for Gene from Leper, saying that he has “escaped” and desperately needs Gene to come to his home in Vermont. Gene goes to Vermont and finds that Leper has gone slightly mad. Leper, who was present at Finny’s accident, reveals that he knows the truth about what happened. Leper’s ranting frightens Gene and makes him anxious about how he himself might react to military life. He runs away back to Devon. When Brinker hears of what has happened to Leper, he laments in front of Finny that Devon has already lost two of its potential soldiers—Leper and the crippled Finny. Gene, afraid that Finny will be hurt by this remark, tries to raise his spirits by getting him to discuss his conspiracy theory again, but Finny now denies the war only ironically.

Brinker, who has harbored suspicions that Gene might have been partly responsible for Finny’s accident, wants to prove or disprove them definitively. He organizes an after-hours tribunal of schoolboys and has Gene and Finny summoned without warning. The boys on the makeshift tribunal question the two about the circumstances surrounding the fall. Finny’s perceptions of the incident remain so blurred that he cannot speak conclusively on the matter; Gene maintains that he doesn’t remember the details of it. The boys now bring in Leper, who was sighted earlier in the day skulking about the bushes, and Leper begins to implicate Gene. Finny declares that he does not care about the facts and rushes out of the room. Hurrying on the stairs, he falls and breaks his leg again.

Gene sneaks over to the school’s infirmary that night to see Finny, who angrily sends him away. Gene wanders the campus until he falls asleep under the football stadium. The next morning, he goes to see Finny again, takes full blame for the tragedy, apologizes, and tries to explain that his action did not arise from hatred. Finny accepts these statements and the two are reconciled. Later, as the doctor is operating on Finny’s leg, some marrow detaches from the bone and enters Finny’s bloodstream, going directly to his heart and killing him. Gene receives the news with relative tranquility; he feels that he has become a part of Finny and will always be with him. The rest of the boys graduate and go off to enlist in relatively safe branches of the military. Gene reflects on the constant enmity that plagues the human heart—a curse from which he believes that only Finny was immune.

1. **Characters** <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/separate/characters.html>

<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/separate/canalysis.html>

**Gene Forrester** -  The narrator and protagonist of the novel. When *A Separate Peace* begins, Gene is in his early thirties, visiting the Devon School for the first time in years. He is thoughtful and intelligent, with a competitive nature and a tendency to brood. He develops a love-hate relationship with his best friend, Finny, whom he alternately adores and envies. He often seems to want to lose hold of his own identity and live as a part of Finny, a tendency suggesting that he is strongly uncomfortable with his own personality. Yet the reader must infer this aspect of Gene, like much of his character, from the actions that he recounts rather than from any explicit statements regarding his mindset: Gene often proves a reticent and unreliable narrator when it comes to his own emotions.

In depth: Gene is the novel’s narrator, and he tells the story as a flashback, reflecting on his days at the Devon School from the vantage point of adulthood. He is the source of all of the reader’s information in the novel and yet proves somewhat unreliable as a narrator—especially regarding insights into his own motivations. We first meet him as an older man returning to the place where he spent his adolescence; we thus initially attribute the wisdom of maturity to him and assume that he brings a certain degree of perspective to his memories of Devon. But even the adult Gene seems filled with fears and insecurities; his great worry, we realize, is that nothing has changed since adolescence—not the school buildings and not, most important, himself. We are then plunged into his memories of an idyllic summer session preceding his senior year in high school and his friendship with the athletic, spirited Finny. But what Gene initially presents as a perfect friendship soon emerges as nothing of the sort; his account of certain actions, along with statements that seem insincere or strained, soon betray his true feelings. Thus, Gene initially asserts that Finny resents *him* for his academic success. The reader quickly comes to realize, however, that it is Gene, in fact, who resents Finny—indeed, he resents Finny all the more for Finny’s lack of resentment toward him.

Finny’s fall constitutes the climax of the story, and, afterward, all of Gene’s resentments fade away. By crippling Finny, he brings him down to his own level. As Gene and Finny subsequently become increasingly codependent, the reader comes to see that Gene’s forced equalization of the two boys may have been darkly deliberate—it may have stemmed from a deep desire within Gene to blur his own identity, to lose himself in another. Gene’s act of putting on Finny’s clothes and standing in front of the mirror, feeling strangely peaceful, symbolizes his desire to leave behind his own self and become Finny. As the object of Gene’s jealousy, Finny is, in the language of the novel’s dominating metaphor, the object of Gene’s own private “war”; yet, as the mirror scene and other episodes make clear, Finny is also Gene’s great love. Because of Gene’s own insecurities and smallness of self, however, he can realize this love only after crippling Finny, for only then can his mixed awe and resentment give way to pure devotion. It is never clear whether, in jouncing Finny from the tree, the young Gene is motivated by an unconscious impulse or a conscious design. What he certainly does not know, however, is that the fall from the tree will set in motion the chain of events leading to Finny’s death, making Gene Finny’s killer, the destroyer of the thing that he loves most. Gene’s fatal tendency to blur love and hate, his deep desire to blur his own identity into Finny’s, is at the core of the novel’s tragedy.

**Finny** -  Gene’s classmate and best friend. Finny is honest, handsome, self-confident, disarming, extremely likable, and the best athlete in the school; in short, he seems perfect in almost every way. He has a talent for engaging others with his spontaneity and sheer joy of living, and, while he frequently gets into trouble, he has the ability to talk his way out of almost any predicament. According to Gene, he is rare among human beings in that he never perceives anyone as an enemy, and never strives to defeat others. Finny’s behaviors also suggest that he relishes pure achievement rather than competition. His fatal flaw is that he assumes that everyone is like him—that everyone shares his enthusiastic and good-natured spirit.

In depth: Although we see all of the characters through Gene’s eyes, his perception of others is most significant in the case of Finny. Even as Gene resents his best friend and harbors dark, unspoken feelings of hatred toward him, he regards Finny at times with something akin to worship. His depiction of Finny contains a strong note of physical, if not erotic attraction. Finny is presented in classical terms, as a kind of Greek hero-athlete, always excelling in physical activities and always spirited—*thymos,* to use the Greek term. (These Greek heroes were, like Finny, fated to die young; the archetype was Achilles, who considered it preferable to live briefly and gloriously than to die of old age.) Energetic and vibrant, Finny is a tremendous athlete; friendly and verbally adroit, he is able to talk his way out of any situation. Finny finds himself in his element during Devon’s summer session; the substitute headmaster enforces few rules and Finny can let loose his spontaneity and boisterousness without restraint. Yet while he constantly tests the limits and asserts his own will, he seeks neither to emerge “victorious” in any argument or contest nor to “defeat” competing systems of rule. Blitzball, the game that he invents in which everyone competes furiously but no one wins, perfectly embodies Finny’s attitude toward life.

Finny’s perspective on competition speaks to a more profound wisdom and goodness regarding other human beings. Just as he dislikes games with winners and losers, so in life he always thinks the best of people, counts no one as his enemy, and assumes that the world is a fundamentally friendly place. These qualities, according to Gene, make Finny unique; Gene believes that humans are fearful and create enemies where none exist. But Finny’s inability to see others as hostile is his weakness as well as his strength; he refuses to attribute dark motives to Gene and he continues to subject himself to what may be a perilously—or even fatally—codependent relationship, never imagining that Gene’s feelings for him are not as pure as his for Gene.

Moreover, by assuming that everyone thinks like he does, Finny often acts selfishly, insisting that he and Gene do whatever he fancies. This carefree, self-absorbed attitude is one of the roots of Gene’s resentment toward Finny, though Finny, aware only of himself and seeing only the good in others, never seems to pick up on Gene’s inner turmoil. Finny is a powerful, charismatic figure—perhaps too good a person, as he inspires in Gene not only loyalty but also jealousy.

**Edwin “Leper” Lepellier** -  A classmate of Gene and Finny. Leper is a mild, gentle boy from Vermont who adores nature and engages in peaceful, outdoor-oriented hobbies, like cross-country skiing. He is not popular at Devon but seems to pay no attention to such things; only later does the text hint at his desire to be closer to Gene and his jealousy of Finny’s position as Gene’s best friend. He is the first boy from Gene’s class to enlist in the army, but military life proves too much for him, and he suffers hallucinations and a breakdown.

In depth: A quiet, peaceful, nature-loving boy, Leper shocks his classmates by becoming the first boy at Devon to enlist in the army; he shocks them again by deserting soon after. Both of Leper’s decisions demonstrate important properties of the war: to the students at Devon, it constitutes a great unknown, overshadowing their high school years and rendering their actions mere preparations for a dark future. Leper’s decision to enlist stems from his inability to bear the prolonged waiting period, his desire simply to initiate what he knows to be inevitable. Later, his desertion of the army again demonstrates a horrible truth: despite their years of expectation, the boys can never really be ready to face the atrocities of war.

Leper’s descriptions of his wartime hallucinations constitute one of the novel’s darkest moments. He proceeds to outline to Gene, with terrifying detail, the hallucinations that he suffered in the army, disproving Gene’s belief that he, Leper, cannot possibly descend into bitterness or angry flashbacks when walking through his beloved, beautiful outdoors. This tension emphasizes the contrast between the loveliness of the natural world and the hideousness of the characters’ inner lives. Most of Leper’s visions involve transformations of some kind, such as men turning into women and the arms of chairs turning into human arms. In a sense, then, Leper’s hallucinations reflect the fears and angst of adolescence, in which the transformation of boys into men—and, in wartime, of boys into soldiers—causes anxiety and inner turmoil.

**Brinker Hadley** -  A charismatic class politician with an inclination for orderliness and organization. Brinker is very straight-laced and conservative. He has complete confidence in his own abilities and has a tendency to carry his ideas through with startling efficiency—at times even ruthlessness. Manifesting a mindset opposite to that of Finny, who delights in innocent anarchy, Brinker believes in justice and order and goes to great lengths to discover the truth when he feels that it is being hidden from him

In depth: Brinker Hadley is, in many ways, a foil (a character whose actions or emotions contrast with, and thereby highlight, those of another character) to Finny. Also charismatic and a leader of the Devon boys, Brinker wields a power comparable but opposite to Finny’s. Whereas Finny is spontaneous, mischievous, and vibrant, Brinker is stolid and conservative, a guardian of law and order. Finny, with his anarchic spirit and innocence, comes to be associated symbolically with the summer session at Devon, with its permissive atmosphere and warm, Edenic weather. Brinker, on the other hand, with his devotion to rules and his suspicious mind, is conceptually connected to the winter session, when the usual headmaster returns to restore discipline, the severe weather puts a damper on the boys’ play, and the distant war intensifies, looming ever blacker on the students’ horizons.

In many ways, Brinker represents the positive sense of responsibility that comes with adulthood. When he convinces Gene to enlist in the army, Gene moves toward accepting obligations and leaving the carefree realm of childhood behind. Yet Brinker also embodies the cynicism and jadedness of adolescence. He suspects the worst of Gene in contemplating his involvement in Finny’s fall. Only at the end of the novel does Brinker fully come into maturity: his earlier support of the war is, in many ways, as naïve as Finny’s insistence that the war is a big conspiracy; now however, he begins to resent the war for its injustice and madness.

1. **Conflict -** *The conflict is primarily internal conflict within Gene.*

* The novel's conflict arises out of Gene's refusal to recognize his own feelings of jealousy and insecurity as the real enemy.
* Instead, his fears are projected onto his closest companion, Phineas, whom Gene suspects of possessing his own feelings of envy and self-loathing.
* With Finny as the enemy, Gene is plunged into a world of competition and hatred, where the only crucial elements worth preserving are his own survival and superiority.
* Ultimately, this act of self-deception drives Gene to malicious thoughts and behavior, destroying any feelings of affection and friendship he might have once had for Finny.
* Upon realizing his mistake and discovering that Phineas does not share Gene's envy and hatred, Gene's isolation and self-loathing deepen and he intentionally cripples the one person who wants to be his friend.
* Knowles documents what happens when adolescence confronts manhood and the fears that develop when change becomes a reality.
* Gene, Brinker, and Leper all become casualties of this change by convincing themselves that the enemy, the cause of their fears, lies outside of themselves.
* Phineas is the one shining example to contrast the self-deception of his classmates, for Finny does not see the enemy in the people around him.
* Indeed, Finny does not see the enemy at all. He embodies the peace that Gene tries to achieve, his physical grace a reflection of the harmony within himself.
* Gene perceives in Phineas the harmony that he yearns for but cannot attain. Because of Gene's own insecurity, a reciprocal and non-competitive friendship becomes impossible.
* For though the two need each other and are often described by Gene as extensions of each other, the balance is unequal: Finny needs Gene as a companion and a friend, someone with whom to share in the challenges of growing up and facing the reality of adulthood; but Gene's need is a born out of jealousy, he covets Phineas for the harmony and confidence that he himself does not have.
* And so rather than share in the friendship that Finny offers, Gene destroys the peace that he was unable to find in himself.
* Phineas is the novel's greatest casualty. He becomes a metaphor for the peace that is lost when Gene is too afraid to identify the enemy within himself.
* For indeed, Finny's harmony is damaged after his fall from the tree.
* He is forced to confront the overwhelming challenge of being crippled for life, and, most importantly, the horrifying realization that the person he thought was his friend is responsible for his injury.
* The task, it seems, is too great even for Phineas, who dies because of the hatred and insecurity around him.
* The peace and friendship that Gene lost, the peace that is Finny, becomes for Gene so internalized that he no longer perceives Finny as separate from himself, evidenced by his feeling that Finny's funeral is his own.

#### Themes <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/separate/themes.html>

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

* **Jealousy:** Gene is envious of Finny's natural athletic ability, charisma, and fluid walk, but believes he compensates for this lack of ability by excelling in academics. Gene leads himself to believe that Finny is attempting to sabotage his academic success with nights at the beach, and the Super Suicide Society. Yet the reader learns later that Finny thought Gene possessed a natural academic ability when he told him to study and not come the Super Suicide Society meeting. This incident further annoys Gene since he realizes he is lacking in a way Finny is not.
* **Irresponsibility:** Finny refuses to follow the school's regulations. Gene is naturally a rule-abiding person, and Finny has an absolute disregard for rules. This difference is also represented in the differences between the summer session and the fall session.
* **Denial**: Finny denies that Gene pushed him out of the tree (despite Gene’s admission of guilt) since he believes that all people are innately good. However, when Brinker begins to question Finny about that day, he runs from the room instead of acknowledging the truth. Another manifestation of this denial of reality is Finny's inability to admit that the war exists. Instead, Finny claims it is a fabrication of fat old men to stop the young people from enjoying themselves. This provides a convenient excuse since he cannot participate in the conflict. He refuses to accept the loss of his athletic ability by forcing Gene to train for the 1944 Olympics.
* **Insecurity**: Gene is insecure about his own ability and intelligence. He doubts his own abilities, and believes that Finny is attempting to destroy his academic success. Yet the reader learns that it is actually Gene's paranoia over his own lack of talent that leads to his distrust of Finny, and eventually to taking the opportunity to destroy Finny's unique nature.
* **Innocence:** Gene tells of how they were children of "careless peace," set apart from adults by their lack of knowledge of the war, and their utter abandon to their own small, happy worlds. Lackadaisical activities of the happy, peace-enveloped juniors are juxtaposed with the semi-military drills that the seniors have to endure. Just as the war encroaches upon the boys at school, their adulthood also looms before them; Gene feels this especially, and this is one of the things that traumatizes Leper-being suddenly thrown into the world of adulthood. Throughout the novel, Gene notes the difference between his state 15 years after Devon, and his state while at the school; he notices differences between the way he is and the way he was, and how age has changed him all in all.
* **War and peace:** Throughout Gene's schooling, war threatens to break in and destroy the fragile peace of the school. The summer session represents the height of peace, as nothing, except for Finny's accident, was able to interrupt the carefree joy of those days. But, as the fall session begins, war slowly begins to encroach on the boys; they start their "physical hardening" at the school, recruitment officers start to come around, and the boys begin to talk about enlistment and the draft. The divide between peace and war is also representative of the gap between childhood and adulthood; while peace holds out, the boys are free to be oblivious of the outside world, and are weighed down by nothing. But, when they are finally confronted by the war, they have to grow up; the strain changes them from children into adults, and obliterates the peace of their youth.
* **Appearance vs. reality:** This book is made up of "Gene's" recollections, meaning that the content, events, and characters are all filtered through his individual point of view. This theme is especially notable in Gene's characterizations of himself, and of Finny. Gene tries to present himself as a rule-abiding, nice kind of person; however, as we see from the events in the book, he is sometimes spiteful, jealous, and has quite a temper when he is stirred up. Gene is not a totally good person, as no one who intentionally injures his best friend and then tries to cover up the truth would be. However, Gene would be hard pressed to admit this, and tries to avoid the subject of his "savage" underpinning. Gene also represents Finny as a happy-go-lucky sort who has been through few problems and has no inner struggles. Even after Finny's accident, Gene insists that Finny has never been conflicted after Finny has tried so hard to avoid implicating his friend despite his anger and bitterness. Finny is far more complex, as we find out at the end, than Gene would like to believe him to be; and as Gene finds out, what is on the surface sometimes does not denote what is hidden underneath.
* **Change under crisis**: Many of the boys in the book including Leper, Gene, and Finny are forced to change when they come upon some sort of crisis situation, or some test of their characters. Under the duress of having entered the military, Leper loses his quiet innocence and becomes confused and angry. Finny's happiness and peace are shattered by Gene's hurtful actions against him, and Gene becomes a better, more forgiving person because of his friend's injuries and early death. As Gene says, all of the boys at the school will change when they discover some oppressive, overwhelming force in the world; change is inevitable, as the boys in the book discover for themselves
* **The Creation of Inner Enemies:**
* A Separate Peace takes place during wartime and is emphatically a novel about war—and yet not a single shot is fired in the course of the story, no one dies in battle, and only the unfortunate Leper even joins the military before graduation.
* Instead, Knowles focuses on the war within the human heart, a war that is affected by the events of World War II but exists independently of any real armed conflict.
* For Knowles—or at least for his narrator, Gene—every human being goes to war at a certain point in life, when he or she realizes that the world is a fundamentally hostile place and that there exists in it some enemy who must be destroyed.
* The novel completely associates this realization of the necessity of a personal war with adulthood and the loss of childhood innocence.
* For most of Gene’s classmates, World War II provides the channel for this loss, and each reacts to it in his own way—Brinker by nurturing a stance of bravado, for example, and Leper by descending into madness.
* Gene himself, though, states that he fought his own war while at Devon and killed his enemy there. The obvious implication is that Finny, as the embodiment of a spirit greater than Gene’s own, was his enemy, casting an unwavering shadow over Gene’s life.
* One might otherwise interpret Gene’s statement to mean that this enemy was himself, his own resentful, envious nature, which he “killed” either by knocking Finny from the tree or by obtaining forgiveness from Finny for doing so.
* In either case, the overall theme is clear: all humans create enemies for themselves and go to war against them. Everyone, that is, except Finny, the champion of innocence, who refuses to believe that anyone could be his enemy.
* In a sense, Finny’s death is inevitable: his innocence makes him too good for the war-torn and inimical world in which the rest of humanity lives.
* **The Threat of Codependency to Identity**
* The central relationship in the novel—that between Finny and Gene—involves a complex dynamic of seeking to establish, yet being uncomfortable with, identity.
* Early in the book, the boys’ relationship seems fueled, in part, by Gene’s envy and resentment of his friend’s dominating spirit.
* As Finny demonstrates his physical ability, Gene feels the need to accentuate his academic ability.
* Finny’s fall from the tree, however, apparently purges Gene of his darker feelings and steers their relationship in a different direction so that codependency rather than envy characterizes it.
* The scene immediately following the fall symbolizes this evolution, as Gene dresses in Finny’s clothes and sees himself as looking exactly like him.
* From this point on, he and Finny come to depend on each other for psychological support. Gene plays sports because Finny cannot, allowing Finny to train him to be the athlete that Finny himself cannot be.
* This training seems an avenue for Finny simply to live vicariously through Gene. But Gene actively welcomes this attempt by Finny, for just as Finny derives inner strength from fulfilling his dreams through Gene, so, too, does Gene find happiness in losing his own self (which he seems to dislike) in Finny’s self (which he likes very much).
* Thus, the boys’ relationship becomes a model of codependency, with each feeding off of, and becoming fulfilled by, the other.
* This codependency obstructs the development of their individual identities, perhaps dangerously: by living within their own private illusion that World War II is a mere conspiracy and continuing to believe that Gene (and Finny through him) will go to the Olympics.
* The boys are refusing to grow up and develop their own ambitions and responsibilities.
* Not even Finny’s death, though it separates them physically, can truly untangle Gene’s identity from Finny’s—he feels as though Finny’s funeral is his own.
* In a sense, the reader realizes, the funeral is indeed Gene’s own; so much of him is merged with Finny that it is difficult to imagine one boy continuing to exist without the other.
* It is perhaps only his ultimate understanding that Finny alone had no enemy that allows the older Gene to re-establish a separate identity—one that he considers, however, inferior to Finny’s.

#### Motifs <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/separate/themes.html>

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.

##### Transformations

There are a number of significant transformations within the course of *A Separate Peace*. Finny is transformed from a healthy athlete into a cripple after his accident and then sets about transforming Gene into an athlete in his stead. These developments function as part of the broader process by which Gene’s identity blurs into Finny’s, a transformation symbolized by Gene’s putting on Finny’s clothes one evening soon after the accident. Meanwhile, the summer session at Devon, a time of peace and carefree innocence, metamorphoses into the winter session, in which rules and order hold sway and the darkness of the war encroaches on Devon. In a broad sense, the novel is intimately concerned with the growth of boys into men. The horrifying visions of transformation that drive Leper from the army—men turning into women, men’s heads on women’s bodies—embody all of the anxieties that plague his classmates as they deal with the joint, inevitable onset of war and adulthood.

##### Athletics

*A Separate Peace* is filled with athletic activities, from the tree-climbing that is central to the plot to swimming, skiing, and snowball fights. For the most part, these games shed light on the character of Finny, who is a tremendous athlete but who nevertheless despises competition (in contrast to Gene) and imagines athletics as a realm of pure vitality and achievement, without winners and losers. This mindset is evident in the way that he behaves after breaking the school swimming record—he refuses to let Gene tell anyone about his feat—and in the game of blitzball, which he invents. Blitzball is the perfect game for Finny because it requires tremendous exertion and agility yet is impossible to win and focuses on pure athleticism rather than the defeat of opponents.

#### Symbols <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/separate/themes.html>

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

##### The Summer and Winter Sessions at Devon

The summer session at Devon is a time of anarchy and freedom, when the teachers are lenient and Finny’s enthusiasm and clever tongue enable him to get away with anything. This session symbolizes innocence and youth and comes to an end with Finny’s actual and symbolic fall, which ushers in the winter session, a time embodied by the hardworking, order-loving Brinker Hadley. The winter session is dark, disciplined, and filled with difficult work; it symbolizes the encroaching burdens of adulthood and wartime, the latter of which intrudes increasingly on the Devon campus. Together, then, the two sessions represent the shift from carefree youth to somber maturity. Finny, unwilling or perhaps unable to face adulthood, dies and thus never enters into this second, disillusioning mode of existence.

##### Finny’s Fall

Finny’s fall, the climax of the novel, is highly symbolic, as it brings to an end the summer session—the period of carefree innocence—and ushers in the darker winter session, filled with the forebodings of war. So, too, does Finny’s fall demonstrate to Gene that his resentment and envy are not without consequences, as they lead to intense feelings of shame and guilt. The literal fall, then, symbolizes a figurative fall from innocence—like Adam and Eve, who eat from the Tree of Knowledge and are consequently exiled from the Garden of Eden into sin and suffering, the students at Devon, often represented by Gene, are propelled from naïve childhood into a knowledge of good and evil that marks them as adults.

##### World War II

World War II symbolizes many notions related to each other in the novel, from the arrival of adulthood to the triumph of the competitive spirit over innocent play. Most important, it symbolizes conflict and enmity, which the novel—or at least the narrator, Gene—sees as a fundamental aspect of adult human life. All people eventually find a private war and private enemy, the novel suggests, even in peacetime, and they spend their lives defending themselves against this enemy. Only Finny is immune to this spirit of enmity, which is why he denies that the war exists for so long—and why, in the end, Gene tells him that he would be no good as a soldier—because he doesn’t understand the concept of an enemy. It is significant that the war begins to encroach upon the lives of the students with any severity only after Finny’s crippling fall: the spirit of war can hold unchallenged influence over the school only after Finny’s death.

1. **Lessons/Morals/Applications**:

Gene's experience illustrates to the reader the peril in assuming what motives other people may harbor. The insecurity that Gene feels concerning his own ability is projected on others, allowing him to believe that they are the reason for his failure. This assumption is made about Finny, but the reader sees that Finny's objective was simply to enjoy his life. Perhaps this aspect of Finny is what infuriated Gene the most. Finny's consistently unconcerned and apathetic attitude represented a peace that Gene could never acquire until he realized his own insecurities and jealousy.

At the end of the novel Gene says, *“ . . . my war ended before I even put on a uniform; I was on active duty all my time at school; I killed my enemy there.”* An essay in *Time* magazine about *A Separate Peace* states, *“. . . one of the things the novelist seems to be saying is that the enemy Gene killed, and loved, is the one every man must kill: his own youth, the innocence that burns too hotly to be endured”* (p.204). Think about these quotations and questions:

• Do you believe that the writer of the essay and Gene are referring to the same enemy—innocence? Why or why not?

• Do you believe every person must leave his or her innocence behind in order to mature? Why or why not?

• What is an example of Gene’s innocence early in the novel?

• Does Gene “kill” his innocence? Explain.

• Does Finny lose his innocence? Explain.