

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 15 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

A Separate Peace is set against the backdrop of World War II. In the United States in 1942, 16 and 17-year-olds were all too aware of the fact that they would most likely be drafted into the military when they turned 18. What's more, there was an ever-present social pressure for young men to join the military even if they weren't drafted, since this kind of service was seen as a duty that all Americans ought to take upon themselves. This is why Brinker Hadley's father tells both Brinker and Gene at the end of the novel that they should enlist in whichever faction of the military will one day make them most proud, since these sorts of details were—at that time—largely what determined whether or not a man was deemed respectable.

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. Both [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. [The Catcher in the Rye](#) does so by taking an uncensored look into the mind of one character, whereas *A Separate Peace* looks closely at the bond between two adolescent friends. Furthermore, it's worth mentioning that Knowles wrote a sequel to *A Separate Peace* entitled *Peace Breaks Out*. The novel is also set at the Devon School and examines the period of peace following World War II. In fact,

it's quite similar to *A Separate Peace*, since it also follows two students whose relationship takes on various complications due to betrayal and distrust. In other ways, *A Separate Peace* is something of a distant forebear to André Aciman's novel of young male attraction, *Call Me by Your Name*. Although it's notoriously unclear whether or not Gene and Finny's relationship is romantic, their subtle and nuanced bond is similar to the varied and complicatedly tender connection that develops between Aciman's protagonist and his love interest.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *A Separate Peace*
- **When Published:** 1959 in Britain; 1960 in the United States
- **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:** Having discovered that Gene intentionally caused him to fall and break his leg, Finny rushes down a hallway and tumbles down a set of stairs, shattering his leg once again.
- **Antagonist:** Jealousy, resentment, and violence

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.

Inspiration. 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, whom 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 30s, returns after 15 years to the preparatory school attended as a teenager, **the Devon School** in New Hampshire. He stops at Devon's main building and looks at a set of marble stairs, marveling at the fact that they seem much smaller than he remembers. At the same time, though, he knows they have stayed exactly the same and that he is the one who has undergone change. Thinking this way, he walks across campus to look at a large **tree** by the Devon River, once again shocked to find that it is much smaller and less

significant than he remembered. This makes him feel glad to have come to Devon, since he now sees that he has grown and gained new perspectives on the hardships he faced as a teenager.

After Gene has this realization, the story shifts to 1942, when he's about to embark upon his senior year in high school. World War II rages overseas, and the smart and careful Gene and his carefree, 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. The school uses this tree as part of its "physical hardening" program, which helps seniors prepare to join the military. Part of this program includes climbing the tree and making the daring plunge from its upper branch into the river, clearing the bank on the way down. Nobody except the seniors have done this, but Finny climbs the tree and jumps. Gene, though terrified, follows. Over time, this act becomes a habit, and Finny proposes that he and Gene form a club, which they name the Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session. One of the rites of passage for joining this secret society is jumping out of the tree. More importantly, Finny and Gene start every meeting by making the plunge themselves, meaning that Gene has to swallow his fear on a very regular basis, since the Super Suicide Society meets each evening.

As summer continues, Gene and Finny grow closer. However, Gene also begins to feel a deep rivalry with Finny, envying his athletic prowess and suspecting his best friend of intentionally trying to distract him from his studies. He thinks this because Finny convinces him one day to ride their bikes to the beach the day before he has an important trigonometry exam. Although Gene would rather study, he goes along with Finny's idea, and the two boys have a fantastic time and end up sleeping next to one another on the sand. Just before they fall asleep, they look up at the stars and Finny tells Gene that he's his best friend, and though Gene wants to say the same thing, he can't bring himself to speak the words. The next day, they barely make it back to campus in time for Gene to take his test, and he fails it miserably. As a result, he privately blames Finny for distracting him, forming a secret belief that Finny wants to sabotage his academic performance because he sees him as a rival.

Despite his theory that Finny wants to interfere with his studies, Gene sees one night that Finny doesn't actually harbor such feelings. When Finny tries to pull him away from studying in order to go to the tree, he responds angrily. In response, Finny tells him that he should continue to focus on his schoolwork if that's what he wants—if Finny had the kind of brains that Gene has, he says, he would focus on school, too. This compliment shows Gene that Finny doesn't see him as a rival, and he bitterly thinks that this is because Finny doesn't think he's *good enough* to be his rival. He then begrudgingly follows Finny to the tree, where Finny suggests that they perform a simultaneous jump. As Finny walks out on the

branch, Gene holds onto the trunk and bounces the limb, causing Finny to lose his balance. For a terrible instant, Finny turns around to meet Gene's eyes, and then he falls to the ground, shattering his leg and his athletic career.

Later, when Finny is in the infirmary, Gene visits him and tries to gauge whether or not he suspects him of malice. At first, Finny insinuates that he *does* think that Gene may have caused his fall, but he immediately apologizes for jumping to such ridiculous conclusions, admonishing himself for thinking so poorly of his best friend. Overwhelmed, Gene jumps out of his seat and prepares to tell Finny the truth, but Dr. Stanpole—who presides over Devon's infirmary—swoops in and sends Gene out. Not long after this exchange, Finny is sent home, and the summer session ends.

Gene goes home for summer vacation for just one month before returning to Devon. On the way back, he visits Finny and confesses that he's responsible for his friend's injury. Finny refuses to believe him, but Gene goes on at length, passionately insisting that he's to blame. Eventually, Finny tells him to stop talking, threatening to kill him if he goes on. In this moment, Gene realizes that he's only hurting Finny even more, so he apologizes and says that he's not making sense because he's so tired from his travels. He then 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 convinces Gene to enlist after the majority of their class volunteers to shovel snow off some nearby railroad tracks, since so many of the town's workers have left for the war. Gene agrees to sign up for the military with Brinker the very next day, but all thoughts of actually following through with this plan fade when he returns to his room to find Finny sitting at his desk. The next morning, Brinker enters Gene and Finny's room and resumes a standing joke that he's developed, which is that Gene purposefully caused Finny's fall in order to get their dorm room to himself. When Finny asks Gene what Brinker's talking about, Gene distracts him by saying that Brinker wants him to enlist. This astounds Finny, whose face betrays disappointment that Gene would ever want to leave him behind. Seeing this, Gene turns on Brinker and tells him that he would never enlist with him—a statement that makes Finny very happy. In a surprising turn of events, though, Finny and Gene's mild-mannered friend Leper Lepellier enlists in the military, quickly leaving the school behind to join the war effort.

In the aftermath of Finny's injury, 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 develops a sense of internal peace that he's

never before experienced. One day, Finny proposes that the boys hold a Winter Carnival, where they raucously play in the snow, drink hard cider, and enjoy a prevailing sense of youthful mischief that is, on the whole, quite innocent in comparison to the war. It's a great success, until a telegram arrives for Gene from Leper. Leper has deserted the military, the telegram explains, and he wants Gene to come meet him at once at his home in Vermont.

When Gene arrives at Leper's house, he learns that Leper ran away from the military in order to avoid getting discharged for having become mentally unstable. Leper tells Gene that he started hallucinating because of the various stressors of military life, seeing strange images that caused him to scream and cry at random moments. Because he knew that being discharged for mental instability would later make it hard for him to find employment, he ran away. As he talks, Gene becomes increasingly uncomfortable, realizing that the military—for which he and all of his friends are inevitably destined—isn't as glorious and rewarding as people would like to think. Thinking this way, he tells Leper to stop talking, but Leper refuses, forging on by saying that Gene has always had something "ugly" lurking within him. This, he says, is why Gene caused Finny to fall from the tree. Hearing this, Gene kicks Leper out of his chair, and though the two boys make up, he leaves shortly thereafter, deeply troubled by what Leper has said.

Back at Devon, Brinker begins to question why Gene hasn't enlisted and suspects it has something to do with Finny's fall, suggesting that Gene feels guilty for what happened to his best friend and therefore doesn't want to leave him behind by enlisting. What's more, the story of what happened to Leper leads both Finny and Gene to admit that the war is indeed real, since only something serious could cause somebody like Leper to have such an adverse reaction. Around this time, Finny spots Leper hiding behind a bush before running into a teacher's room. That night, Brinker and a few other students round up Gene and Finny and hold a mock trial to investigate Finny's fall. Although Gene resists this, they proceed, asking Finny what he remembers about that evening. Eventually, they bring in Leper as a witness, and the information he gives them about what happened in the tree makes it clear to everyone—including Finny—that Gene purposefully caused the fall. In response, Finny stands up and rushes out of the room, making his way down the hall before crashing down the nearby set of marble stairs and re-breaking his leg.

Gene tries to visit Finny in the infirmary that night, but Finny is furious at him, so he spends the night wandering campus and feeling as if his surroundings are strange and foreign to him. The next morning he visits Finny once more, and together the two boys agree that Gene's actions at the tree were not purposeful. Finny also admits that he has spent the entire year writing to various military organizations, desperately wanting

to find one that would allow him to contribute to the war effort. Because they all denied his requests, though, he decided to ignore the war altogether.

Finny dies that afternoon after a small amount of his bone marrow enters his bloodstream. Dr. Stanpole tells Gene that he will most likely have to get used to hearing this kind of bad news, since he and his friends are headed for the war. Despite this devastating turn of events, though, Gene doesn't cry, nor does he shed a tear at the funeral, since he feels that Finny is now a part of him and he believes that one does not cry at one's own funeral.

In the aftermath of Finny's death, Gene and his classmates graduate and enlist in the safest branches of the military. Gene never sees active duty, but feels that 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.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Gene Forrester – The novel's narrator and protagonist. At the beginning of the novel, Gene is a man in his 30s looking back on his days as a student at private preparatory academy called **the Devon School**. As a student, he is extremely intelligent, vying for valedictorian and proving himself as a capable athlete. He is also sensitive and immensely competitive, especially with his roommate and best friend, Finny, with whom he spends all his time during the summer session after their junior year at Devon. Gene's relationship with Finny is complex and nuanced, since he simultaneously admires and envies him. At times, Gene so adores his friend that he actually wants to *become* him, privately marveling about what it would be like to be such a confident, talented, and charming young man. At other times, though, Gene feels incredible resentment for Finny's athletic and social accomplishments, eventually imagining that Finny feels similarly competitive and is trying to sabotage his own academic success in order to ensure that he (Gene) is as well-rounded as him. 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. When Finny returns to school several months later, Gene is relieved to see that he has put the incident behind them, thinking that Finny doesn't suspect him of malice. In the coming months, though, one of his fellow classmates, Brinker Hadley, voices his suspicions regarding what happened in the tree that summer—a development that leads to Finny's realization that Gene hurt him on purpose. This, in turn, has disastrous effects on both Gene and Finny's relationship and Finny's entire life. Simply put, *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.

Phineas (“Finny”) – Gene’s best friend and classmate at **the Devon School**. Finny is a talented athlete and a charismatic student leader who’s earned the respect and admiration of the entire student body. His freewheeling behavior often gets him into trouble, but his charm saves him from every potential disciplinary snag. Finny 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, simply appreciating the beauty of their friendship and treating Gene with the kind of fellow-feeling that comes along with such close relationships. Unfortunately for him, though, Gene’s skepticism interferes with their relationship, since he comes to resent the fact that Finny thinks everyone shares his carefree approach to life. This misunderstanding leads Gene to cause Finny to **fall** out of a tall **tree**, thereby ruining his athletic career and altering the course of his life. And though Finny suspects that Gene did this on purpose, he never accuses him of this behavior because he values their friendship too much, believing that it would be wrong to level such claims at his best friend. If anything can be said against Finny, it is that he is overly optimistic and idealistic, choosing to see the best in people instead of focusing on certain harsh realities. Similarly, he hatches a conspiracy theory that World War II is a hoax, insisting upon this to Gene as a way of distracting himself from his disappointment that he can no longer join the military. This is the same kind of denial he applies to his relationship with Gene, choosing to force any suspicion out of his mind until Brinker Hadley forces him to reconstruct the memory of his fall, at which point he realizes that Gene caused his injury. This realization destabilizes his and Gene’s friendship and ultimately leads to Finny’s death, since he tries to run down a set of stairs after hearing the news and ends up falling down them. Despite all that has happened, though, he manages to forgive Gene before dying.

Brinker Hadley – Brinker Hadley comes from a wealthy family and is obsessed with truth, order, and justice. Like Finny, Brinker is well-known on campus and widely considered a leader. But while Finny stands for the freewheeling innocence of youth, Brinker represents the reserved discipline of adulthood. For this reason, he romanticizes the idea of enlisting in the military to contribute to World War II, even convincing Gene to enlist with him one day several months after Finny’s accident. However, Finny returns that very day, and Gene decides to stay at **Devon** instead of joining the military. Losing steam, Brinker also decides to delay his enlistment, and this decision leads to a sense of disillusionment with the ordered, respectable life he has built. In turn, Brinker quits the many clubs and committees to which he belongs and adopts a cynical attitude about the war, reveling in the idea of breaking rules in his final year at Devon. At the same time, though, he never loses

his passion for justice and discovering the truth, a fixation that leads him to suspect Gene of intentionally harming Finny. In the novel’s climactic scene, Brinker assembles a number of students to form a mock tribunal to hear Gene’s case, finally making it clear to Finny that Gene purposefully caused his **fall**. And though Brinker’s ability to intuit the truth about this situation makes him seem astute and mature, he makes light of the situation without recognizing the profound effect it has on Finny, who ends up falling down a set of stairs—and eventually dying due to complications from his injury—upon realizing the truth. In this regard, Brinker fails to account for the complex interpersonal dynamics surrounding Finny’s fall from the tree, proving that he isn’t quite as mature and shrewd as he’d like to think.

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 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. Furthermore, the fact that joining the military destabilizes Leper so thoroughly is what finally forces both Finny and Gene to admit the overwhelming reality of the war, suddenly sensing its proximity and severity by registering its profound effect on their otherwise mild-mannered friend. When Brinker holds a mock tribunal to determine whether or not Gene intentionally caused Finny’s **fall**, Leper serves as the key witness, confirming that Gene bounced the **tree** limb and sent Finny plummeting to the riverbank.

Cliff Quackenbush – Cliff Quackenbush is an irritable and condescending **Devon** crew team manager. Disliked by most Devon students, Cliff mistreats anyone who he has power over. In the aftermath of Finny’s fall, Gene decides that he will become the assistant crew manager because he doesn’t want to play sports, no longer trusting himself to engage in competitive activities after what he did to Finny. However, his plan goes awry when he punches Quackenbush in the face, defending Finny’s honor because Quackenbush uses the word “maimed.” In response, Quackenbush puts him in a wrestling hold, and the two boys fall into the river.

Mr. Prud’homme – Mr. Prud’homme is a substitute house master at **Devon** and is in charge of Gene and Finny’s building during the summer term. Because Mr. Prud’homme isn’t as strict or severe as the other masters, Finny finds it easy to charm the man and thereby avoid ever getting in trouble for his and Gene’s habitual shenanigans.

Mr. Ludsbury – Mr. Ludsbury is the house master of Finny and Gene’s dorm during the regular academic calendar. A stern disciplinarian, Mr. Ludsbury works long and hard to maintain

order and despises the lax environment that the substitute masters, Mr. Patch-Withers and Mr. Prud'homme, allowed to develop during the summer session. Despite his severity, though, he has such faith that the students will follow his orders that Gene and Finny find it easy to defy his orders, simply failing to do what he tells them and getting away with it because he doesn't check to see if they've complied.

Dr. Stanpole – Dr. Stanpole is the main doctor at **Devon's** infirmary. He is caring and kind, and pities Gene and his friends for the war-torn world they will soon have to face. When Finny breaks his leg for the second time, Dr. Stanpole thinks he can reset the bone without sending the boy to a real hospital, since it's such a simple procedure. However, a small amount of Finny's bone marrow leaks into his bloodstream and kills him, devastating Dr. Stanpole, who later tells Gene that Finny has died and that Gene will most likely have to get used to this kind of devastating news, since his generation is headed into the war.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Chet Douglass – An excellent student, tennis player, and trumpeter, Chet Douglass vies with Gene to be the valedictorian of **Devon**. He is also part of Gene and Finny's entourage during the summer of Finny's **fall**.

Brownie Perkins – Brinker Hadley's shy and reclusive roommate, who acts as his obedient sidekick.

Bobby Zane – A member of Gene and Finny's circle of friends during the summer of Finny's **fall**.

Mr. Patch-Withers – Mr. Patch-Withers is the substitute headmaster of **Devon** during the summer term. Like Mr. Prud'homme, Patch-Withers is less strict than the regular masters and falls prey to Finny's charm.

Phil Latham – Phil Latham is the wrestling coach at **Devon**. Because he knows First Aid, he cares for Finny immediately after his second accident.

Mr. Hadley – Mr. Hadley is Brinker's father. His patriotic views annoy both Gene and Brinker, since he admonishes them for not joining more dangerous branches of the military.

protagonist, never actually faces battle. The book begins as news of World War II sweeps over Gene and his best friend, Finny, infiltrating their final summer term and academic year at **the Devon School**. Despite the constant presence of the war, though, Finny and Gene exist in the halcyon days of youthful innocence, focusing on schoolboy antics and their blossoming friendship. In this regard, they resist the war's looming influence, simultaneously maintaining and creating a sense of peace that exists separately from the rest of the world. Given this innocence, then, it's surprising when Gene develops a secret rivalry with Finny, convincing himself that Finny is trying to become a more well-rounded student than him. Thinking this way, Gene causes Finny to **fall** off a **tree** overhanging the river, sending his friend plummeting to the bank. This fall changes the course of Finny's life, and as the consequences of this ugly act reverberate throughout the novel, Gene comes to see that any sense of enmity in his relationship with Finny has sprung from his own toxic sense of rivalry. In turn, *A Separate Peace* focuses not only on the encroaching influence of literal war on young men like Gene, but also on the *internal* wars that humans often wage with themselves and their loved ones—wars that ruin a person's ability to enjoy the simple beauty of things like friendship and innocent happiness.

As 17-year-olds, growing up for Gene and Finny means hurdling toward World War II. As they pass an idyllic summer at Devon, they're well aware that they're destined to join the military when they turn 18, as evidenced by the fact that Gene refers to the boys a year older than him as "draft-bait" who might as well already be considered soldiers, since their lives have been consumed by training regimens and a "physical hardening regimen." Finny and Gene, though, have not yet reached this point, leaving them free to experience the simple pleasures of adolescence. And yet, they can't ignore what's happening to the students just one year older than them, which is why Finny suggests that they should jump from a tree overhanging the Devon River—a task that the older boys must complete as part of their pre-military training. This desire to take part in the same exercises as the "draft-bait" students indicates that Finny and Gene are already entangled in the war effort, even if their experience of it is—for the time being—remote and abstract. No matter their age, it seems, they can't avoid thinking about and preparing for the war.

As the war rages on outside the sheltered environment of Devon, Gene experiences another kind of rivalry. Although he and Finny are affectionate best friends enjoying what will most likely be their last summer as innocent adolescents, a bitter kind of enmity works its way into Gene's mind. Knowing that Finny is well-liked and the best athlete in school, he starts to suspect that his best friend doesn't want him to do too well in academics, thinking that Finny wants to be the most well-rounded student in school. This occurs to him because Finny is always trying to distract him from his studies, constantly



THEMES

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WAR AND RIVALRY

John Knowles's *A Separate Peace* is a novel about violence and rancor even though Gene, its

convincing him to have fun instead of preparing for tests or completing his homework. Consequently, Gene decides that his friendship with Finny isn't really as innocent as it seems. With this mindset, he senses that he and Finny are "both coldly driving ahead for [themselves] alone," seeing their friendship not as a beautiful relationship with mutual affection, but as a competition based on self-interest. In other words, he applies the antagonism inherent in war to his bond with Finny, taking cues from the outside world in a way that destroys the insulated, blissful peace that he and Finny have managed to maintain in spite of World War II's reigning influence.

Driven by this sudden sense of rivalry, Gene unthinkingly causes Finny to fall out of the tree. In doing so, he ends Finny's athletic career, thereby taking away the thing his friend loves most. And though Finny seems to willfully forget that Gene most likely caused his fall, he later finds himself unable to process his emotions when it finally becomes clear—at the end of their senior year—that Gene acted against him. In fact, he's so flustered by this realization that he falls down a set of stairs, an accident that ultimately leads to his death in the school infirmary. By calling attention to this chain of events, Knowles illustrates the devastation that rivalry can bring to otherwise healthy relationships, since Finny's injury and death can be traced back to Gene's misplaced resentment in the tree that fateful summer day.

At the beginning of the novel, Gene romanticizes the idea of joining the military and fighting in World War II. By the end, though, he tries to avoid any actual fighting, enlisting only so that he can join the safest branch of the military (instead of waiting to get drafted, which might put him on the front lines). This change of heart suggests that he has learned that only sadness, loss, and regret come from embracing the kind of rivalrous mindset that war requires. After all, he allowed this kind of thinking to steer his relationship with Finny, and now Finny is dead. Simply put, he comes to believe that wars are made "by something ignorant in the human heart." Indeed, it is this emotional ignorance—this bitterness and inability to appreciate love—that he has allowed to leak into his friendship with Finny. And in doing so, he has ruined the "separate peace" that their relationship afforded him, proving that the kind of enmity that accompanies war and rivalry is destructive and tragic.



IDENTITY

A Separate Peace showcases the process of identity formation. Gene makes his way through several identities in an attempt to define himself in relation to his surroundings. Although he experiments with multiple personas (the athlete, the intellectual, the daredevil, etc.), the most prominent identity that he adopts is arguably that of Finny's best friend. Investing himself in their friendship, Gene closely associates himself with Finny, feeling proud that he's his

closest friend. However, defining oneself in relation to somebody else doesn't actually lead to the formation of a unique identity, which is perhaps why Gene eventually tries to define himself in *opposition* to Finny, a decision that not only harms Finny but also puts a strain on their friendship. After distancing himself from Finny through an unpremeditated act of violence, Gene finds himself trying in vain to make up for his behavior, suddenly even further from establishing his own sense of self than he was before. As a result, Gene is alone and unsure of himself after Finny dies, since he has yet to establish a substantial identity that exists in and of itself. By highlighting this process, then, Knowles stresses the importance of learning to accept oneself on one's own terms.

Gene idolizes Finny, respecting his athletic prowess, freewheeling charm, and easygoing nature. Because of this appreciation, he cherishes their friendship, as if he can hardly believe that he, out of everyone, has become Finny's best friend. In other words, he has willingly defined himself in relation to Finny, delighting in the fact that everyone sees him as Finny's closest friend. This, however, means prioritizing what Finny wants over what Gene himself wants, as is the case when Gene agrees to jump off **the tree** overhanging the river every night in order to please Finny. Each night, the boys assemble the Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session, a club they established. To kick off the meetings, Finny and Gene jump off the tree, and though Gene never wants to do this, he ignores his reservations because he knows he would "lose face" with Finny if he refused to jump. In fact, losing Finny's approval is such an upsetting idea to him that he never even voices his true feelings about the tradition. In turn, readers see that Gene isn't comfortable enough in his own skin to bear Finny's disapproval. After all, Finny is more than just Gene's best friend—he's the person Gene has based his entire identity upon. Accordingly, to go against Finny would be to go against himself.

Surprisingly enough, though, Gene actually *does* go against Finny after deciding that they're secret rivals. Convinced that Finny doesn't want him to succeed, he suddenly sees himself as a competitor, somebody who poses a threat to Finny's position as the school's most respected, well-liked student. In this regard, he predicates his identity on the supposed difference between Finny and himself, setting himself in opposition to his best friend as a way of establishing a sense of self-worth and independence. This mindset is what leads him to send Finny **falling** to the ground one night during the Suicide Society's tree-jump, effectively destroying Finny's athletic career and taking away his best friend's ability to compete with him.

As soon as he does this, Gene regrets having ever tried to define himself in opposition to Finny, realizing that he doesn't want to be Finny's competitor, he wants to *be* Finny. In an act of private contrition, he begins dressing in Finny's clothes while Finny recovers at home. One day, he looks in the mirror and feels a sense of relief because of how much he looks like Finny,

thinking that he'll never have to "stumble through the confusions of [his] own character again." He has, therefore, gone from defining himself as Finny's best friend to seeing himself as Finny's competitor to, finally, trying to embody Finny himself, clearly thinking that he won't have to come to terms with his own identity if he can simply inhabit Finny's. But above all, what's most clear throughout these transformations is that Gene is desperately grasping for a way to establish his own sense of self. No matter how he does this, though, he's always defining himself in relation to Finny rather than maturing into his own person.

It's worth mentioning that Gene isn't the only person in the novel trying to come to terms with his identity. For instance, Leper decides to enlist in the military even though this contrasts with his gentle nature, and Brinker Hadley goes from being a model student to something of a rebel. In both cases, the boys undergo a series of reversals as they experiment with different ways of moving through the world. But what's different about their process of identity formation is that they don't depend on anyone else as they search for the kind of person they want to be, whereas everything Gene does relates to his bond with Finny. This is perhaps because his connection with Finny goes beyond that of a normal friendship, sometimes even bearing traces of romance, though Gene actively avoids considering this possibility, as does Knowles himself. And though the idea that Gene is attracted to Finny is historically controversial, it's worth thinking about when contemplating the role that identity plays in the novel. After all, Gene tries hard to determine who he is, and he does so almost exclusively in relation to his bond with Finny. Whether or not this is because he loves Finny is ambiguous, but the fact of the matter is that he never allows himself to be his own person, even after Finny dies. Indeed, Gene continues to live in the "atmosphere" that he thinks Finny cultivated in life, meaning that he tragically never manages to actively construct his own sense of individuality.



CHANGE AND GROWING UP

John Knowles's *A Separate Peace* is a story about the ways in which time and maturity can change a person's perspective on the past. At the beginning of the novel, Gene visits **the Devon School** for the first time in 15 years. When he arrives, he realizes that he has always thought of the school itself as frozen in time. By association, then, he has also considered his experiences at the school as immutably stuck in the past. However, returning to Devon helps him recognize the emotional distance he has gained in the years since Finny's death. Going back, he can scarcely believe that the **tree** Finny fell from looks so small. And yet, his feelings about this have less to do with the tree itself than with the enormity of his own actions as a teenager, when he bounced the limb and sent Finny plummeting. What he wants to see, it

seems, is that *he* has changed, that he's no longer the kind of person who would act against his best friend. This is why he has come to Devon: not necessarily to measure how much the school has changed, but to measure how much *he* has. Accordingly, he feels the resonance of an old adage, "The more things remain the same, the more they change." Although he treasures the memory of Finny, his relationship to the horrible events of the past has transformed. Having gained the kind of perspective that only the passage of time can bequeath, Gene wriggles out from the burden of guilt and sadness that followed Finny's death. And though there's nothing he can do to alter the past, the mere fact that he has changed helps him cope with the trauma of his adolescence.

Gene arrives at Devon as an adult feeling as if the place has been stuck in time ever since he graduated. He admits that he feels in a "deep, tacit way" that Devon sprung into being when he first set foot on campus and then "blinked out like a candle the day" he left. While he was a student, every single day felt extremely real and alive, but the memory of this does nothing to help him see that Devon has continued to exist without him. This suggests that humans often associate their subjective experiences with certain places and time periods, unable to keep their own perceptions from coloring and defining the way they look back on the past. It's worth noting that Gene considers these thoughts alongside his guilt about Finny's death. After all, if he sees Devon as stuck in time, then he must also think of what he did to Finny as locked away and inaccessible, so firmly rooted and preserved in the past that nothing about the entire ordeal—not the way he thinks about it nor the way he processes his grief—can ever change. In this sense, then, Gene's decision to revisit Devon is an attempt to recapture a period in his life that now feels impossible to access and, thus, impossible to process.

To his surprise, though, Gene finds that Devon *has* changed. Returning to campus, he sees that it hasn't vanished from existence, and he also sees that it hasn't remained exactly the same, noting that the buildings have a certain newness to them. As he walks around, he marvels at the various changes before realizing that nothing much about his surroundings has actually changed all that much. Rather, the way he *looks* at the environment at Devon has shifted. For instance, when he visits the marble steps that Finny fell down, he notices that they aren't as tall or numerous as he used to think. And yet, he recognizes that they're exactly the same as they've always been, meaning that his perspective is the only thing that has changed. Consequently, he begins an "emotional examination" of all the ways he has grown since his time at Devon. In turn, readers see that coming back to Devon has helped him take stock of the way he has matured and developed since adolescence, thereby enabling him to approach his memories with a renewed perspective that might help him cope both with his guilt and with the loss of his best friend.

Recognizing that Devon has changed while also staying largely the same, Gene has newfound hope that *he* has also been able to “slowly harmonize” his growth with everything that came before it—namely, Finny’s death. When he visits the tree, he’s surprised by how small it looks. Not only is he himself bigger now, but the tree itself seems withered and weak. In this sense, then, his relationship to it suddenly shifts because both the tree and he have undergone change. This, in turn, shows him that “nothing endures,” an idea that somewhat frees him from his guilt and sorrow. Although he’s not necessarily excusing himself for what happened to Finny, he’s allowing himself to acknowledge the passage of time, permitting himself to accept that he’s not necessarily the same person who caused Finny to **fall**. This, it seems, is what time and maturity can grant a person: the nuanced ability to accept the unalterable past alongside that which has already changed. And by embracing this perspective—celebrating the human capacity to change—people like Gene find themselves newly capable of processing grief.



OPTIMISM, IDEALIZATION, AND DENIAL

In *A Separate Peace*, John Knowles examines optimism, suggesting that it can sometimes lead to denial. As someone who makes the best of any situation, Finny focuses only on what he thinks is good. He deeply appreciates the purity of athletics, thinking that sports are an “absolute good” and believing that everyone always wins whenever they play sports, since the mere act of taking part in such activities is rewarding in and of itself. This underscores his wholesome approach to life, demonstrating his optimistic attitude and unwillingness to consider loss or defeat. However, it’s worth noting that this mindset is rather easy for him to adopt, since he’s a talented athlete and therefore rarely loses a game. The closest he comes to defeat is when he **falls** and breaks his leg, an accident that renders him unable to continue his athletic career. Rather than wallowing in his own destruction, though, Finny remains cheerful, deciding that he’ll train Gene for the 1944 Olympic Games while also pretending that World War II doesn’t exist. In some ways, this reaction has to do with Finny’s love of sports and his propensity to respond optimistically to hardship. In other ways, though, this sudden preoccupation with the Olympics is a form of denial, since he uses it to distract himself from the thing that upsets him most: that he can’t take part in the war. When he finally admits this to Gene, readers see that his positivity isn’t as unshakable as it seems, and Knowles intimates that people often use optimism to mask and obscure unhappiness.

Finny’s pure, good-natured way of thinking is apparent early in the novel. “You always win at sports,” he tells Gene, meaning that *everyone* wins, no matter what happens in a given game. This is because anyone who takes part in a sporting event will benefit from the mere fact that they’ve participated in

something Finny sees as an “absolute good.” To Finny, athletics represent the best parts of the human soul, embodying healthy competition, endurance, collaboration, and courage. Furthermore, Finny applies this optimistic attitude to other areas of his life, clearly unafraid of encountering hardship or losing, as made evident by the daring conversations he has with teachers at **Devon**, in which he says ludicrous things and tries to win them over, apparently unafraid of what might happen if he fails to convince them not to punish him. In this sense, Finny sees all of life as a certain kind of sport, constantly testing himself because he has nothing to lose—after all, “you always win at sports.”

Finny’s all-encompassing optimism makes sense, considering that he hasn’t had to face much defeat in his life. As the school’s best athlete, he rarely finds himself on the losing side of an athletic competition, and as a young man from a wealthy family, he has encountered very little in the way of adversity. Accordingly, it’s easy for him to remain optimistic—that is, until he falls out of a **tree** and injures himself so seriously that he’s never able to play sports again. Nonetheless, he apparently retains his positive worldview in the aftermath of this accident, choosing to focus on helping Gene become a talented athlete instead of wallowing in self-pity. To do this, he informs Gene that he’ll be training him to qualify for the 1944 Olympic Games. Although this outlandish plan aligns with Finny’s general approach to life, it’s so overzealous that it soon comes to seem that Finny is purposefully distracting himself from his new shortcomings. In keeping with this, he hatches a bizarre conspiracy theory that World War II isn’t real. While he trains Gene for the Olympics, he insists that powerful adults have made up a story about the war in order to keep young men like Gene and Finny himself in line. Because of this, he argues, Gene should focus only on qualifying for the Olympics, not on the prospect of joining the war. By setting forth this theory, Finny effectively insulates Gene and himself from the harsh realities of the outside world, managing to maintain a sense of levity and optimism in an otherwise bleak cultural moment.

Despite his best efforts, though, Finny can’t protect himself from the miserable truth that there’s a war happening and that it will most likely affect everyone at Devon—everyone, that is, except for him. When Gene tells him that their quiet, mild-mannered friend, Leper, left the military because he went “crazy,” Finny finds it hard to maintain his optimistic, unrealistic conspiracy that there isn’t really a war. To that end, he realizes that if Leper’s stint in the military could cause him so much strife, the war must be as real and terrible as everyone says. “Oh I guess I always *knew* but I didn’t have to admit it,” he tells Gene, confirming that his decision to ignore the war was a way for him to actively deny reality. It is in this same moment that he calls off his plan to train Gene for the Olympics, halting his idealization of athletic purity and the inherent goodness of sports—an idealization that has helped him deny what’s really

going on in the world. Later, he admits that he's been writing to every military organization he can think of, spending the entirety of the school year trying to find a way to contribute to the war. Because no organization will take him, though, he decided to focus on other things, turning his attention to the Olympics and gushing about Gene's prospects in order to distract himself from his disappointment. Regardless, though, he's eventually forced to acknowledge reality, thereby suggesting that his optimism has failed to shield him from his own discontent—an indication that this kind of denial (or perhaps denial in general) is ineffective and fleeting.



FRIENDSHIP AND HONESTY

More than anything, *A Separate Peace* is a novel about friendship—its joys, its benefits, its limits.

Gene and Finny's relationship is unique, shot through with both childish simplicity and a complex tenderness they don't always know how to navigate. To add to this already intricate dynamic, envy and competition often work their way into the friendship, and this is what ultimately threatens their bond. Throughout the novel, Gene tries to sort out his feelings of admiration and jealousy, and though he is certainly wrong to take out his various insecurities on Finny, his most serious failure is his inability to be honest with his best friend. Before the accident, he's unable to tell Finny not only that he cares about him, but that he feels threatened by him. Then, in the aftermath of the accident, he can't bring himself to admit that he caused Finny's fall. Although Finny seems at times to have sensed the truth, he never accuses Gene, clearly believing that his friend would tell him if he'd done such a horrible thing. This, after all, is what Finny himself would do, since he always tells Gene what he's thinking and how he feels. Whereas Finny demonstrates unflinching emotional honesty, then, Gene embodies secrecy and insecurity, and this only estranges him from Finny. As a result, Knowles highlights the detrimental effect that dishonesty has on otherwise beautiful and deep relational connections.

Before Finny's fall, his and Gene's relationship isn't quite as full of dishonesty as it is later, when Gene must hide the truth about what happened in the **tree**. Still, though, their initial friendship is more nuanced than the average bond between two teenaged boys. This becomes clear when Finny convinces Gene to sneak away from school to go to the beach. Just before falling asleep on the sand that night, Finny thanks Gene for coming with him, going out of his way to say that this isn't the kind of excursion he would make with just anyone. It is, he says, something he'd only do with a best friend. "Which is what you are," he says after a pause. Gene privately acknowledges that this is a brave thing to say, since everyone at **the Devon School** goes to great lengths to hide their emotions. However, Gene can't bring himself to reciprocate Finny's sincerity, feeling somehow "stopped by that level of feeling, deeper than

thought, which contains the truth." This is a very enigmatic line, since Gene never clarifies what, exactly, the "truth" is in this context. Consequently, readers are left with nothing more than the fact that Gene is apparently unable to be honest about his feelings for Finny, perhaps because these feelings make him uncomfortable.

One very legitimate interpretation of this ambiguity is that Gene loves Finny and sees him as more than a friend but is afraid to admit this because he hasn't come to terms with his own sexuality. Of course, this is a somewhat contentious reading—not because there isn't textual evidence to support such a claim, but because Knowles himself has said that he did not intend for Finny and Gene to be romantic with each other. Still, it seems plausible that Finny and Gene are indeed in love and that the "truth" Gene can't bring himself to admit is that he is a young gay man who has fallen for his best friend. Even if this isn't the case, though, it's overwhelmingly clear that Gene and Finny have the kind of connection that transcends the boundaries of ordinary friendship, and it is perhaps because Gene is uncomfortable with this closeness that he instinctually (but still purposefully) causes Finny to fall out of the tree shortly after this sensitive interaction.

Like many things in *A Separate Peace*, Knowles also never clarifies why Gene "jounces" the tree limb. Because of this, readers must consider multiple possibilities, one of which is that Gene is frightened by how close he and Finny have become. Another possibility—which could indeed exist alongside the first—is that he is jealous of Finny and thinks that they're in competition with each other. Either way, a lack of openness in their relationship is what leads him to do what he does. After all, if he were capable of simply telling Finny how he felt, then he wouldn't feel the need to distance himself by hurting him. Similarly, if he spoke honestly to Finny about his feelings of envy and competition, he would most likely understand that Finny isn't trying to one-up him, and so he wouldn't try to assert his dominance by sending him hurdling to the ground. Unfortunately, though, he is apparently incapable of speaking the truth, even when he later tries to make up for what he did by telling Finny that it was his fault when he visits him at home. As soon as he sees how much the truth will upset Finny, Gene takes back what he has said, insisting that he's tired and out of sorts. For the rest of the school year, then, he acts as if he had nothing to do with Finny's fall, and Finny—who wants to see the best in Gene—chooses to believe him.

Because Finny wants to believe that Gene would never do something to hurt him, he's devastated when he finally discovers the truth, rushing into the dark hall on his bad leg and falling down a set of marble steps. What's remarkable, though, is that Finny finds it within himself to forgive Gene while lying in the hospital with yet another break in his leg. All he wants to know, he says, is whether or not Gene's hostile act was "personal." When Gene assures him that it wasn't, he says that

he believes him. This conversation takes place shortly before Finny dies unexpectedly while the doctor is resetting his bone, meaning that Finny dies after having made peace with Gene, their relationship—and Finny’s life—ending in honesty and unchecked emotion. Gene, on the other hand, will live the rest of his life regretting what he did and the way he lied to Finny for so long. By outlining this tragic dynamic, Knowles warns that dishonesty can take a terrible toll not only on friendships, but on the individuals who find themselves unable to speak openly about their feelings.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE TREE

The large tree from which Finny falls looms in Gene’s mind even as an adult, representing the ways in which certain elements of the past can often seem overwhelming and unconquerable in a person’s memory. As a man in his 30s, Gene imagines the tree 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 has stayed more or less the same, Gene realizes that he himself has changed and ultimately gained a new perspective over the years, one that enables him to face the tree without seeing it as something that will continue to haunt him. The tree is therefore a symbol of the profound changes in perspective that time and growth can grant people, demonstrating that even the most harrowing elements of a person’s memory are mutable.



FALL (AUTUMN) AND FINNY'S FALL

Finny’s fall from the tree and the seasonal transition from summer to fall mark the novel’s main points of change. During the summer session, the boys enjoy a time of carefree youthful adventure. When the summer session ends and fall and winter come, though, everything changes: **Devon** returns to its strict disciplinary ways, and the threat of having to fight in World War II darkens everyone’s consciousness. The novel’s other main “fall”—Finny’s fall from **the tree**—has much the same effect. With that fall, the joy of childhood that Finny himself symbolized disappears, and the boys’ different reactions to the fall help define who they’ll be as adults. In both cases, the characters undergo a loss of innocence and simplicity, one that is embodied by the changing seasons and Finny’s tragic accident.



THE DEVON SCHOOL

In the novel, the Devon School symbolizes both change and resistance to change. An oasis that protects them from change, Gene and Finny’s school insulates them from the outside world. At the same time, though, the boys recognize the ways in which the institution undergoes transformation as a result of World War II. In this capacity, they sense the complexities of the outside world while existing in a protected environment, an environment capable of both admitting and resisting change. Indeed, the institution is over 160 years old, meaning that it has weathered the wars of the past while adapting as necessary to society at large. In keeping with this, one of Gene’s first observations about the school when he returns as an adult is that it can “harmonize” its past with its present, representing the kind of fluid resilience that he himself would like to adopt. As he searches for ways to achieve happiness without completely forgetting the hardships of his past, then, the school becomes a symbol of healthy and natural forms of growth or progress.





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 Devon School, he returns to a tree by the river. Although readers do not yet know the significance of this tree, the nostalgia that colors Gene’s encounter with it alludes to its thematic importance in the novel, suggesting that the tree itself looms large in Gene’s memory. The tree, as Gene explicitly describes, serves as a symbol of “the giants of [his]

childhood”—the individuals that one views with unbridled admiration during adolescence. Now, though, the tree seems physically smaller to Gene because it itself has shriveled, Gene has grown, and his entire perspective has changed. Viewing this tree then causes Gene to become further “changed” because it provides him with an opportunity to reflect upon his own growth, emphasizing the extent to which he has matured since his adolescence. And though Knowles hasn’t yet revealed why Gene is so interested in charting how much he has changed, what becomes clear is that he’s eager to assure himself that he’s not the same person he was as a teenager.

☝ 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), Phineas (“Finny”)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Upon visiting the Devon School as an adult and locating a tree that has remained in his memory for 15 years, Gene feels an overwhelming sense of transformation. The shrunken tree reminds him of the scenery after a battlefield, as if its shriveled features recall a “death by violence.” This comparison introduces the influence of World War II on Gene, as thoughts of the war mingle with his memories of adolescence. And yet, what he’s really focused on is the fact that the tree—which once seemed so indomitable and foreboding—now looks insignificant. This, in turn, proves to him that the passage of time fundamentally alters everything in the world, no matter what. This is an important realization, since readers will soon learn that Gene purposefully caused his best friend, Finny, to fall from this very tree. For this reason, the tree has haunted Gene all the way into adulthood. Now, though, he can finally assure himself that he has changed in relation to what happened in the past, as evidenced by the fact that the tree itself has become withered and weak. Now “Changed,” he allows himself to stop obsessing over the past, effectively granting himself permission to move on with his life.

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, Gene and his best friend Phineas are 16-year-old students at Devon and are busy engaging in reckless, spontaneous activities during their school’s Summer Session—all at Phineas’s urging. With his spontaneous attitudes, easy charm, and impressive athletic abilities, Phineas (“Finny”) leads the other students in endeavors that often just cross the line and delve into the realm of what’s forbidden. Although Finny should be reprimanded according to the prep school’s regulations, though, the faculty are more than likely to let him off the hook, especially when Finny provides a charismatic reason for his various ventures. From his mature perspective, Gene understands that the faculty allowed such behavior because it symbolized the less complicated, freer times before World War II completely influenced every aspect of life for young men like Finny. What’s more, Gene no longer views Finny with the envy that used to harbor when Finny got away with things that nobody else would have gotten away with. Instead of becoming subconsciously irritated that Finny was allowed to break every rule, the older version of Gene now more sympathetically understands the broader social issues that inspired the faculty to treat his friend with such lenience, demonstrating the new perspectives that time and growth afford people.

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:   

Page Number: 45



Explanation and Analysis


When Finny breaks the school swimming record for the fastest 100-yard freestyle dash without even practicing or preparing, Gene can hardly believe his eyes. Excitedly, he informs his best friend that he swam seven-tenths of a second faster than the previous record-holder, and Finny is quite pleased. However, he—unlike Gene—doesn't want to spread the news of his victory, not wanting to add to his impressive list of athletic prizes by repeating this feat with a more public audience. In fact, he even asks Gene to keep the news to himself, inspiring Gene to wonder about his friend's motives. Gene considers that Finny might want to impress him, or that Finny might simply be above rivalry. For someone as competitive as 16-year-old Gene (and all his competitive, jealous peers at the Devon School), this is surely a frustrating and nearly unfathomable possibility. For Finny, though, such accomplishments are enough in and of themselves, and this ultimately outlines the fundamental difference between him and Gene—namely, that he doesn't fixate on his competitive urges, instead simply focusing on pursuing happiness and those things that will give him a sense of reward.

achievement at Devon. Gene takes this rationale as evidence for Finny's competitiveness, and convinces himself that Finny is just as competitive as him. Therefore, Finny and Gene are "even in enmity"; Finny is just as morally questionable as Gene. Although Gene is here stating that he and Finny are equal, this thought underscores his competitive spirit, as he reveals that he does not want to recognize the way that Finny is morally superior to him and above his competitive, jealous perspective. In this tragic way, then, Gene views his otherwise beautiful bond with Finny as toxic and full of bitterness, thereby giving himself permission to mistreat his best friend.

☝ 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), Elwin "Leper" Lepellier, Phineas ("Finny")

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 59



Explanation and Analysis

After Finny announces that another student, Leper, will leap from the tree one night while Gene is trying to study for an exam, Gene lashes out at Finny. This is because he secretly suspects that Finny is purposefully trying to sabotage his academic performance by constantly distracting him. Thinking this way, Gene finally tells Finny that he'd rather study than go to the tree, though he slams his book and starts to follow his best friend. Still, he has been withholding his resentment and anger for so long that he angrily informs Finny that he might "ruin [his] grade" if he doesn't stay in and study. In response, Finny acts surprised and oddly "interested," appearing to genuinely feel sorry for interrupting Gene's work. To that end, he makes it clear that he had no idea that Gene felt this way, and he goes on to say that Gene *should* stay in and study. If Finny himself were as good at school as Gene, he, too, would focus on academics. When he says this, Gene's theory (that Finny has invented a number of exploits in order to prevent him from studying) falls flat, and he must once again face the reality that Finny seems oddly innocent and free from the jealousy that tortures Gene. Instead of pleasing him, though, this idea further upsets Gene because it makes him feel as if he isn't

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 swimming record for the hundred-yard freestyle dash, he takes Gene to the beach, where they stay overnight. Gene barely arrives back at school in time for his trigonometry test in the morning, which becomes the first test he has ever failed. After this occurs, Gene believes he that understands the motivation behind Finny's insistence upon involving Gene in such reckless activities all summer: he is, according to this new theory, attempting to sabotage Gene's academic

good enough to even compete with Finny.

☞ 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


Explanation and Analysis



In this passage, Gene describes the moments leading up to and proceeding Finny's fall from the tree. The small, seemingly insignificant physical movements that he includes—bending a knee, swinging a head—constitute the narrative core of the entire novel. They do not conclusively establish Gene's guilt, but they certainly allow readers to see why Gene might be guilty: his knees bend, but it's almost as if Gene himself isn't in control of his own body. The passage doesn't indicate that he *intends* to bend his knees, but simply that they bend. And yet, it seems likely that he does do this on purpose, since his resentment of Finny has recently become even stronger than before. Furthermore, it's worth noting that once Finny falls, Gene finally jumps from the tree limb without fear, almost as if he has replaced Finny with this athletic action and new carefree attitude. Free from jealousy, it seems, he can do anything. This suggests that the idealized version of Finny—which has so affected Gene and, in turn, readers—has already been lost and replaced by Gene himself, though the consequences of his actions will surely keep Gene from even remotely enjoying his new and unfair chance to triumph over his best friend.

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), Phineas ("Finny"), 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, the school, which had been largely "leaderless" due to the leniency of the few faculty members who remained over the summer, has returned to its typical, hierarchical order. Students like Brinker Hadley return to their usual positions of power, which Gene compares to various martial positions of command. Here, Finny is gone, and the carefree atmosphere that he fostered has left with him, replaced by the realities of growing up and the looming threat of World War II. Despite this dismal turn of events, though, Gene still remembers what it was like during the Summer Session, when easygoing eccentrics like Leper were allowed the time to daydream. In this regard, he already knows what it's like to yearn for the past, before he has even left high school. This, of course, is because he regrets what he did to Finny, wishing that he could rewind time and make things right. Because this is impossible, though, he's forced to continue moving forward, left with no choice but to accept the unrelenting march of time.

☞ So to Phineas I said, "I'm too busy for sports," and he went into his incoherent groans and jumbles of words, and I thought the issue was settled until at the end he said, "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 (speaker), Phineas ("Finny")

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 85



Explanation and Analysis


After Finny's fall, he still considers Gene a "pal," and his utter lack of rivalry, jealousy, or resentment remains intact. This is made especially apparent when Finny encourages Gene to play sports "for him," indicating that he wants to live vicariously through his best friend. Indeed, Finny urges Gene to take his place, clearly unbothered by the idea that the very person who caused his injury might live out the life he himself could have had if he hadn't fallen from the tree. In turn, Gene takes comfort in the thought that his "purpose" is now to replace Finny, subsuming his own identity into that of the friend he so admires. Along with this thought comes a "soaring sense of freedom," as Gene revels in the idea of finally embodying the kind of confidence and grace that Finny himself has always displayed. This, it seems, is what Gene always wanted, yearning to "become a part of Phineas." Unfortunately, though, it took him acting out against his best friend in order to satisfy this desire.

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), Phineas ("Finny")

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

With this description of the way that World War II slowly but surely descends upon Devon, Gene alludes to the emotional complications that pervade his life in the aftermath of Finny's injury. Interestingly enough, there is a strange reversal at play in his life, since his closest friendship—with Finny—is rife with guilt and malice while the menacing presents itself at first in a guise of humor, as if it isn't real or serious. Although schoolboys should be engaging in playful, easy friendships, at Devon the intrinsic rivalry seems to make the sentiments of war exist at home, whereas the actual war seems remote and abstract. Indeed, the separation between Devon and the battlefields of World War II allows the war to become a mere diversion

from the violence between the school boys, an "invasion" that lacks the emotional connotations of true warfare.

☛ 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), Phineas ("Finny"), Brinker Hadley

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears shortly after Gene decides to enlist in the military with Brinker Hadley. As someone so caught up in the various struggles of identity formation, Gene finds the anonymity associated with being a soldier appealing. This is somewhat unsurprising, considering that he is desperate to emulate Finny in any way possible in order to avoid the "confusions of [his] own character," as he mentions elsewhere in the novel. In addition, he also finds the danger of military life appealing, and he reflects that this is nothing unusual for the kind of person that he is. In fact, he reacts to war in the same way that he reacts to everything else, particularly his relationship to Finny. This indicates that war, like other competitive environments such as a prep school, is something that reveals one's inner character. In this sense, Gene's sudden attraction to the war unveils his tendency to gravitate toward things that might cause him harm—things, it seems, like his friendship with Finny, which (despite its beauty) has caused him significant emotional turmoil.

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), Brinker Hadley, Phineas ("Finny")

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gene reflects upon the fact that he would have enlisted in the military with Brinker if Finny hadn't come back to school at the exactly right moment. Inspired by his Brinker's passion for enlisting, Gene makes a resolution to enlist, to spontaneously join the communal war effort and remake his life. Upon returning to school, though, Gene finds Finny, and all thoughts of joining the war immediately leave him. The next morning, he sees that Finny is dazed and surprised by the idea that Gene would even consider leaving him to join the war, so Gene drops the idea completely, committing himself to his friendship with Finny and letting the realities of the outside world wash over him like "a wave at the seashore." In this moment, readers see the profound effect that Finny has on Gene, enabling him to all but ignore what's happening beyond the confines of the Devon School.

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")

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 136

Explanation and Analysis

During one Saturday afternoon, Gene and his classmates hold a winter carnival. Stimulated by cider, a general awareness that they're breaking school rules, and the fact that they're creating a fictitious celebration, they engage in revelry, establishing a sort of "momentary, illusory, special and separate peace." Readers know that this peace contrasts with the harsh reality of World War II, especially since Gene recently almost enlisted in the military before backing down. For this brief moment, then, the boys enjoy one last afternoon of youthful innocence, unsullied by the influence of the bleak and terrible world that awaits them once they graduate and join the military, effectively putting themselves at the mercy of a violent war.

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

This passage appears shortly after Leper informs Gene that he ran away from the military because he was deemed a "psycho." As Leper continues to tell his story, Gene is consumed by fear, realizing that his friend's hardships aren't as remote as he'd like to think—after all, he and the rest of his peers are undoubtedly destined to join the military at some point in the next year or so, meaning that he, too, might encounter the same psychological pressures that destabilized Leper so thoroughly. Worse, Leper didn't even go overseas or face any actual combat, instead losing his peace of mind in the United States while in basic training. Given that Gene has spent the majority of World War II ignoring its influence on his own existence, this is an understandably harsh shock, as he suddenly sees that he's not as insulated from the conflict as he would like to think, especially since merely joining the military apparently has the power to unravel otherwise stable young men.

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), Brinker Hadley, Phineas ("Finny")

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 191



Explanation and Analysis

After Brinker Hadley holds a makeshift court session to investigate the cause of Finny's fall from the tree, Finny grows agitated and storms out, rushing down the hall and falling down the marble stairs. When Gene visits Finny

afterwards, Finny says he cannot take being an invalid while there's a war going on, forced to remain isolated from the rest of the world because he can't serve his country. Gene, however, rightly tells his best friend that he would "make a mess out of the war" because of his inherent goodness. According to this viewpoint, Finny is unfit for war because he's such a kind-spirited person. With this characterization, Gene implies that people 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. In other words, Gene is the kind of person that is fit for war, not loving people like Finny, who exists apart from petty jealousy and competition.

☞ 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), Phineas ("Finny")

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

Phineas dies because some of his bone marrow leaks into his bloodstream and makes its way to his heart during the surgery to reset his broken leg. Upon discovering this, Gene does not cry for his friend, nor does he cry at Finny's funeral. This is because he feels as if the funeral is his own, sensing that his and Finny's identities were intertwined with one another. In this sense, Gene has lost himself in Finny's identity, and though this thought provided him some comfort earlier in the novel, it now means that he has lost a part of himself. At the same time, though, the thought that he and Finny were one in the same is also somewhat soothing, since it helps Gene feel as if he has retained part of his friend's essential being, thereby suggesting that,

despite the many complications inherent in their bond, their friendship ultimately has emerged as a sustaining, beautiful force capable of supporting Gene through loss and hardship.

☞ 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:   

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of *A Separate Peace*, Gene looks back not only on his time in the war, but on the effect that Finny's death had on his experience as a soldier. Because he feels as if he "killed [his] enemy" while still at Devon, he never manages to cultivate a true sense of animosity or enmity for the people he's supposedly fighting as a soldier (it's worth noting, though, that he never fought on the frontlines of the war). This ability to keep himself from hating others arises from the fact that his friendship with Finny taught him to be careful with his own emotions. Rather than acting out of resentment or bitterness, he now knows to treat others with the sort of kindness that he failed to show Finny that fateful day in the tree over the Devon River. When he says that he "killed [his] enemy," some readers might assume that he's referring to Finny. More likely, he's referring to the ugly aspects of his own identity that drove him to treat his best friend with animosity. Having experienced painful feelings of regret surrounding Finny's death, Gene knows that he is his own true enemy.



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 visits **the Devon School** in New Hampshire 15 years after graduating. As he walks through campus, he feels that something has changed. The buildings seem different, as if they're glossier and covered in varnish. When he stops to think about this, he realizes that the school for him was a place of somber austerity because he attended during World War II. Things like varnish, he thinks, must have gone off to the war—along with everything else. Now, as he surveys this shiny new appearance, he realizes that he has always felt that Devon sprang into existence when he first set foot on campus and then winked out as soon as he left. Standing on the grounds, though, he can plainly see that this isn't the case.

Gene notes that he used to feel a constant sense of fear when he was a student, and the only way he's able to recognize this is by noticing its absence as an adult. This, in turn, tells him that he has managed to wriggle free of the persistent sense of foreboding that used to follow him around as an adolescent. Thinking this way, he goes to the First Academy Building across the campus, a building that looms large in his memory. When he enters, he faces a set of marble stairs and stops to look at them, noticing that, despite all this time, the indentations in the center of each step aren't very deep. This tells him that the marble itself is extremely hard and durable—a thought that disarms him for a moment, since he can't believe that this "crucial fact" didn't occur to him before.

Still looking at the marble stairs, Gene understands that they're the same as they've always been. He, however, feels different than he did as a teenager, when he walked up and down these steps every day. Feeling older, he begins to catalogue all of the ways in which he feels changed. He's taller and—more importantly—doesn't feel quite as small in comparison to the staircase. Turning, he goes back outside and makes his way through muddy terrain toward the Devon River, thinking as he goes that **Devon** is both different and the same as it has always been. It has managed, he thinks, to "harmonize" its changes with its past, and this gives him hope, making him feel as if he might be able to do the same.

In the opening pages of the novel, John Knowles calls attention to several important thematic threads. First, readers see the effect that World War II had not only on the Devon School, but on Gene himself, since he still spends time thinking about the ways in which the war impacted his adolescence. Furthermore, it becomes evident that Gene struggles to grasp the changes that have taken place since he was a teenager. Returning to Devon makes him feel like he has returned to a very specific period in his life, and though this period feels remote, he recognizes that Devon has continued to exist without him—a sign that his past is perhaps not as inaccessible as he might otherwise think.



That Gene was consumed by fear as a student at Devon suggests that something about the school's atmosphere—perhaps its social dynamics or its wartime customs—were intimidating and fraught. Similarly, his thoughts about the marble staircase and how it hasn't changed despite how different it seems indicates that something terrible must have happened while Gene was a student at Devon. Otherwise, he most likely wouldn't obsess over how much he has changed in relation to this environment. As it stands, his interest in registering his own growth implies that he wants to believe that he's a different person than he was when he was a teenager.



In this moment, it becomes clear that Gene has come back to Devon so he can come to terms with something that happened in his past. More importantly, he wants to make peace with himself, hoping that he'll be able to "harmonize" the person he's become with the person he used to be. This, of course, implies that he feels at odds with himself, as if his current identity clashes discordantly with his troubled memories of the past. As he seeks to rectify this, the Devon School becomes a barometer of sorts, helping him determine just how much he has matured since he was a student.



Ruining his shoes in the mud, Gene finally reaches the river and starts looking for a particular **tree**. Peering through fog and wind, he senses that any of the trees along the riverbank could be the one wants to find, and this alarms him because he would have thought that it would stand out. In his mind, the tree is huge and commanding, hulking enormously over its surroundings. When he finally identifies it by certain markings in the bark, though, he's startled to see that it's much smaller and more insignificant than he remembered. In fact, not only is it smaller, but he himself is larger than he used to be, so that the tree seems doubly small.

Gene is grateful to have found **the tree** and to have seen how truly small it is. This makes him think of an old French saying, which translates to, "The more things remain the same, the more they change after all." With this in mind, Gene contemplates the fact that nothing in life can withstand the test of time—everything changes, even love and "a death by violence." Feeling changed, he returns to campus.

The narrative jumps back to 1942, when Gene is attending the summer session at **the Devon School**. Looking at **the tree**, he feels as if it's enormous and foreboding, and he doesn't even want to climb it, let alone jump out of it, which is exactly what Phineas, his roommate and best friend, wants to do. Unlike Gene, Phineas is unafraid, waxing poetic about how much he likes this tree. As he does so, Gene stalls by responding sarcastically, but Phineas (or "Finny") makes him laugh in spite of himself. They are standing beneath the tree with three other friends: Elwin "Leper" Lepellier, Chet Douglass, and Bobby Zane. The tree itself is the focus of many boys at Devon, since it's part of the fitness test that seniors have to pass before graduating. And though they aren't yet seniors, Finny has decided that he and Gene must complete the test.

Jumping out of **the tree** is more than a simple fitness test—it's also part of the "physical hardening regimen" that the school has developed to prepare seniors for the military. World War II is gaining momentum, and the young men just one year older than Gene and Finny are all headed to the war, either enlisting or getting drafted. For now, though, Gene and his friends are too young to get swept up in the military, although Finny declares that they will be contributing to the war effort by jumping out of the tree. He then playfully asks his friends if any of them would like to go first, and when nobody responds, he climbs the rungs nailed into the trunk, balances on the limb that stretches out over the bank, and jumps, making sure to clear the bank.

Again, Gene charts his own growth by comparing himself to things that used to seem colossal to him as a teenager. However, it's worth noting that this tree most likely seemed larger when he was child not just because he himself was smaller, but because it was somehow significant to his everyday life. Of course, Knowles hasn't yet clarified why this might be the case, but the fact that Gene trudges through mud and rain and fog just to see a spindly old tree suggests that it is fraught with meaning.



Readers still don't know what, exactly, has brought Gene back to Devon, other than that he clearly wants to gain a new perspective on something that happened when he was a student. As Knowles prepares readers to read the rest of the novel, then, he merely puts an emphasis on the nature of change, calling attention to the fact that time and renewed perspectives can help a person cope with even the most difficult memories—memories that apparently have to do with love and death.



Although the very beginning of the novel is somber and wistful, this shift back to 1942 changes the novel's tone, as young Gene revels in the joys of summertime. Of course, World War II is already going strong, but Gene is more focused on pleasing his best friend, Finny, than on anything having to do with the war. In this regard, then, he has managed—at least so far—to retain his youthful innocence.



The fact that the seniors above Gene and Finny have to jump out of this tree to physically prepare themselves for the military spotlights the ways in which Devon has been influenced by World War II. Although Gene and Finny are still enjoying the innocence of youth, the students just one year ahead of them are already focusing on training their bodies and becoming adults. This, in turn, influences the younger boys' summer, encouraging adventurous people like Finny to gravitate toward daring, dangerous activities. Despite this, even his supposed attempt to contribute to the war effort is rather juvenile, since it's obvious that simply jumping from the tree will do nothing to influence what happens in Europe.



Although he resists it with every fiber of his being, Gene agrees to jump next. When he mounts the limb, he sees he'll have to fling his body forward in order to avoid landing on the bank. As he contemplates this, Finny reminds him that he won't be able to hesitate like this when his ship is getting torpedoed by enemies. In response, Gene throws himself into the water, and when he surfaces, Leper suggests that his jump was even better than Finny's, though Finny tells him to hold his judgments until he tries it himself. Despite this, nobody else agrees to make the plunge. "It's you pal," Finny says to Gene, "just you and me."

As the five boys walk back to campus for dinner, Finny says that Gene did well, though he points out that he needed to guilt him into going through with the jump. This, he says, is one of Gene's problems—he always needs Finny to push him into doing things. Gene objects and begins to walk faster so they aren't late for dinner, launching into what Finny refers to as his "West Point stride." Thinking that his friend is being too serious, Finny trips Gene, inciting a wrestling match that lasts so long that they ultimately decide to skip dinner. Instead, they go to their dorm room, do some homework, and go to sleep.

CHAPTER 2

Mr. Prud'homme, a substitute teacher at **Devon** for the summer, comes to Finny and Gene's room the next morning to admonish them for missing dinner. Instead of making up an excuse, Finny plainly tells him that they were swimming in the river and then wrestling in the fields. He also goes on at length about the beauty of the sunset the night before, saying that nobody would want to miss such a thing. As he goes on and on, Mr. Prud'homme tries and fails to maintain his disciplinarian attitude, though he points out that Gene and Finny have already missed nine meals in the last two weeks. In response, Finny tries even harder to win him over—not because he cares about what happens, but simply because he enjoys the challenge of winning teachers over.

Intent upon trying to charm Mr. Prud'homme, Finny admits that the actual reason they missed dinner was because they had to jump out of **the tree**. This, Gene notes, is a much more serious infraction than missing a meal, but Finny launches into a long monologue about how they must prepare for the war, since they will soon be old enough to enlist or get drafted. In fact, he says, Leper will be eligible to go to war before the end of the upcoming academic year. When Finny finally stops talking, all Mr. Prud'homme can do is sigh and suppress a bewildered laugh before leaving them alone.

Finny's comment about pausing before jumping off a sinking ship underscores the extent to which thoughts about violence and the war pervade the group's otherwise innocent and childish exploits. What's more, Gene's unwillingness to tell Finny that he doesn't want to jump suggests that he's eager to impress and please his best friend, meaning that he most likely loves it that he and Finny are the only ones to make the jump—an act that solidifies their bond, even if there is a whiff of competition in the air after Leper suggests that Gene's jump was better than Finny's.



The dynamics of Gene and Finny's relationship emerge in this scene, as Finny suggests that he always has to egg Gene on in order to get him to do anything truly adventurous. Perhaps because of this accusation, Gene is all too eager to stop and wrestle with Finny to prove that he isn't as serious as he seems. In turn, readers see the profound effect that Finny has on Gene and, in turn, the strong, all-consuming bond that is their relationship.



*Finny's charming nature comes to the forefront of the novel in this moment, as he proves himself capable of enchanting teachers even while acknowledging his own wrongdoing. His ability to captivate people is an important thing to keep in mind, since *A Separate Peace* is largely about Gene's admiration for Finny and his discomfort surrounding the fact that he both appreciates and envies his best friend's beautiful way of moving through the world.*



Finny challenges himself by seeing if he'll be able to win over Mr. Prud'homme after admitting to an even more incriminating offense. To do this, he references his respect for the war and reminds Mr. Prud'homme that he and Gene are on the cusp of entering it. In this regard, he uses the war to his advantage, acting like jumping out of the tree is an admirable act of patriotism—which, to be fair, he apparently thinks it is, eager as he is to become involved in the war. Once again, then, readers see just how much the war has already influenced the Devon environment, even for students like Gene and Finny, who are still too young to be in the military.



Gene describes Finny as a unique boy, someone who is good and kind, even if he's also a rule-breaker. Gene believes that the faculty members at **Devon**—especially in the summer term—look fondly upon Finny and the rest of the students in their year because these boys remind the adults what peace is like. After all, none of the boys are registered yet with the draft board, and none of them have needed to take physical tests to prove their worthiness of the war effort.

Finny thinks about the war constantly, often talking about the various updates he's heard and speaking patriotically about what's happening. Shortly after Mr. Prud'homme leaves his and Gene's room, he puts on a pink shirt. This astounds Gene, who worries that people will make fun of Finny. "It makes you look like a *fairy!*" he says, but this doesn't bother Finny, who says, "Does it?" Looking in the mirror, he adds, "I wonder what would happen if I looked like a fairy to everyone." He then tells Gene that, on the off-chance that "suits" start crowding their space, he can tell them that Finny's shirt is nothing more than a show of solidarity with the American troops, who just bombed Central Europe for the first time. Because he doesn't have a flag, he says, he's going to wear this shirt as a celebration.

Throughout the day, Gene watches Finny explain to his teachers why he's wearing a pink shirt, speaking passionately about the bombing in Central Europe. That evening, the substitute headmaster, Mr. Patch-Withers, hosts a party at his home. Finny wears his pink shirt and talks to Mr. Patch-Withers's wife. At one point, she notices that he's wearing the **Devon** school tie as a belt. Finally, Gene thinks, Finny has gotten himself into too much trouble, offending both Mr. Patch-Withers and his wife. However, he launches into an explanation, saying that the belt is supposed to signify Devon's involvement in the war effort. This is feeble logic, but Mr. Patch-Withers can't help but be amused, and Gene finds himself oddly disappointed that Finny didn't get punished, though he dismisses this feeling by telling himself that he must just want to see some excitement.

Although Finny likes to act like his various exploits are somehow related to the war, the adults in his life appreciate his innocence and naivety, clearly seeing his casual misbehavior as the last vestiges of youthful purity. Because Finny and his peers haven't yet been forced to enter the military and haven't been subjected to the harsh realities of life during war, they stand for a simpler, more innocent time in the educators' minds. This, in turn, gives them a certain leeway to do what they want.



*When Finny puts on a pink shirt, he's unbothered by the idea that people might make fun of him. This demonstrates just how comfortable he is with his own identity. Unlike Gene, he is unconcerned with how other people see him. Of course, it's worth considering that Gene is horrified by the idea that someone might think Finny is a "fairy"—a word that underlines his own homophobia. Given that *A Separate Peace* is a novel about two young men who are very close, Gene's moment of homophobia and insecurity suggests that he is perhaps struggling with his own sexual identity, possibly questioning whether or not he himself is attracted to men. Many scholars and commentators have debated this element of the novel, but the exact nature of Finny and Gene's relationship is ambiguous. Suffice it to say, Gene can hardly fathom what it would be like to accept himself for who he is in the same way that Finny accepts himself, ultimately calling attention to his struggle to come to terms with his own identity.*



As Gene watches Finny scramble to explain why he's using the Devon tie as a belt, he finds himself hoping that Finny will finally get in trouble. Although Gene admires his best friend's ability to charm his way out of seemingly any situation, he apparently yearns to see Finny fail. This suggests that Gene's relationship with Finny isn't as simple as it might seem. Rather than wanting his friend to excel under all circumstances, Gene wants proof that Finny is capable of failure. As a result, it becomes clear that he feels threatened by Finny's infallibility and probably jealous of it.



After the party, Finny and Gene head to the river. On the way, they discuss the war, and Finny says that he doesn't actually believe that American forces bombed Central Europe. Gene agrees with this sentiment, thinking about how such things feel distant and remote in the beautiful, idyllic New Hampshire summer. When they reach the river, they swim for a while before Finny asks if Gene is still afraid of jumping from **the tree**. Gene claims he isn't, so Finny asks him to jump first, and he obliges. On their way up the tree, Finny proposes that they form a club to make their "partnership" official—in this club, he says, all members will be required to jump from the tree. The name, they decide, will be the Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session.

About to jump, Gene loses his balance on **the tree** limb. Seeing him teeter, Finny swiftly reaches out and catches him. Flooded with relief, Gene jumps without fear, and Finny follows him into the water. For the rest of the night, Gene can't stop thinking about how bad it would have been if he had fallen, recognizing that he could have been killed. Thinking this way, he realizes that Finny saved his life.

CHAPTER 3

Gene thinks about how Finny saved his life, but he also realizes that Finny is the one who put him in danger in the first place—after all, he wouldn't have even been in **the tree** if it weren't for Finny. Thinking this way, he decides that he doesn't need to feel all that grateful that Finny caught him from falling. In the coming days and weeks, the Super Suicide Society becomes widely popular, as other boys want to join for the appeal of belonging to a secret society. Each night, then, the club meets at the river, and Finny and Gene begin the sessions by jumping from the tree. Despite the frequency with which they do this, though, Gene never gets over his fear of climbing the tree and throwing himself into the water. Whenever it's time to go to the river, he wishes he could bring himself to refuse.

Finny and Gene doubt the latest developments in the war because everything feels so far removed from their immediate environment. Although the students one year older than them are all rushing toward the war, they themselves have yet to encounter it in any real or tangible way. For this reason, they are free to focus on more innocent matters, like jumping from the tree, solidifying their bond, and forming secret societies.



When Finny casually saves Gene from falling, he proves himself as a friend, demonstrating that he will always be there when Gene needs him. This, it seems, is what true friendship looks like.



Gene's gratitude for Finny doesn't last long. This suggests that there's something about their relationship that keeps him from fully appreciating Finny, as if he's actively looking for shortcomings in his friend. And yet, it is rather obvious that any shortcomings that he identifies in Finny are actually his own. After all, he blames Finny for making him climb the tree in the first place, but he never actually voices his hesitancy, even after nearly falling. In turn, his own insecurity is to blame for his near miss, not just Finny's gung-ho attitude.



Despite his desire to tell Finny every night that he can't come to the river, Gene never voices his true feelings. Instead, he follows Finny to **the tree** and jumps, eternally afraid of losing Finny's favor. Meanwhile, he observes that Finny has certain steadfast beliefs. One, for example, is that everyone always wins when they play sports. This is because he sees sports as an "absolute good," believing that nothing bad can ever happen in an athletic event. With this appreciation intact, he is appalled when the school tries to force him and his classmates to play badminton. Instead, he finds a medicine ball on the fields where the seniors do calisthenics in preparation for joining the military, and he invents "blitzball," which he and his friends name after the military term "blitzkrieg." In this game, everyone tries to knock down whoever's carrying the ball.

Blitzball becomes the unofficial sport of the summer, as everyone wants to play. The best athlete at the school, Finny is a natural at Blitzball, running circles around his opponents and sometimes even chuckling to himself when he thoroughly dupes them. Gene watches him in admiration, observing how good he is at seemingly everything he does. Even socializing comes easy to Finny, who wins over anyone who speaks to him. All in all, then, Gene is in awe of Finny and is happy—proud—to be his roommate and best friend.

Gene notes as an aside that everyone has a certain moment—a "moment in history"—that defines their life, so that when they think about anything truly important, they think of it in the context of this period. For him, this period took place during World War II, when he was at **the Devon School** with Finny and hearing about the war while living out the easy existence of a 16-year-old student. During this time, he thinks that 16 is the best age, that it is an ideal point of life in which adults are both impressed and bewildered by the vitality of youth.

One day, Finny and Gene are hanging out at the school's pool when Finny sees that nobody has broken the 100-yard freestyle swimming record for years. Finding this ridiculous, he has Gene time him, claiming that he can beat the current record-holder's time. Sure enough, his time is seven-tenths of a second faster than the record. Gene can't believe this, insisting that they'll have to go get an official timekeeper and some witnesses so that Finny can do it again and solidify himself as the new record-holder. However, Finny says he's not going to do this, insisting that it's enough to simply know that he broke the record. He also makes Gene promise not to tell anyone what happened.

Unlike Gene, who is rather cynical even if he doesn't always voice his misgivings, Finny is an optimist. This is why he sees jumping out of the tree as something more than just a fun activity, but as a vicarious contribution to the war effort. Similarly, he idealizes athletic pursuits, thinking that playing sports is inherently good. By outlining this dynamic, Knowles emphasizes Finny's unflinchingly good attitude, which stands in stark contrast to Gene's many private reservations.



Despite Gene's private hesitations and competitive thoughts, he still feels strongly for Finny. Moreover, he's proud to be his best friend, clearly feeling that his association with Finny enriches his life and improves his image. In this sense, then, he is devoted to their friendship and genuinely invested in their bond, even if his admiration sometimes bears traces of jealousy.



In this section, readers see that any influence of the war on Gene's life is oblique and remote, even as it continues to impact his surroundings. Looking back, he conflates the war with his own development into an adult—a period that feels definitive for anybody, regardless of whether or not there is a war going on. All the same, though, the war shapes Gene's adolescence simply by hanging over it, casting a certain shadow on his innocence even if he's too wrapped up in his own innocence to pay much attention.



Finny's unwillingness to publicize his athletic success is evidence of his belief in the inherent goodness of athletic endeavors. Whereas Gene allows a certain amount of vanity to steer him, Finny is happy just knowing that he beat the record. This outlines a fundamental difference between the two boys, simultaneously revealing Gene's competitive nature and Finny's carefree belief in anything that seems genuine or pure.



Baffled, Gene tells Finny how impressed he is. Finny, for his part, unexcitedly accepts this praise, and Gene wonders if his friend is trying to impress him. And yet, he knows that Finny already has multiple athletic awards and senses that he truly doesn't care about anything other than the knowledge that he's capable of swimming faster than the record-holder. This idea overwhelms Gene with admiration and astonishment, and he begins to see Finny as too unique to be his—or anybody's—rival. And this, he knows, is significant because most of the relationships between boys at **Devon** are founded upon a sense of rivalry.

Discounting his own success, Finny says that swimming in pools doesn't count as "real swimming." He then suggests that he and Gene should go to the beach, which will take hours to reach on their bikes. Nothing about this suggestion sounds appealing to Gene, who hates long bike rides and knows that such an outing could result in expulsion. What's more, it will make it impossible for him to study for a math test that is set to take place the following day. Nonetheless, he agrees, and the two boys set off. On the way, Finny tries to entertain Gene by telling long stories and doing tricks on his bike, clearly wanting to make sure Gene is having a good time.

When they arrive at the beach, Finny and Gene play in the water. But after a big wave overpowers him, Gene returns to the sand while Finny frolics alone. That evening, they stroll the boardwalk, eat hotdogs, and use fake draft cards to order beer at a local bar. In public, Gene notices that everyone's eyes are drawn to Finny because of his beautiful tan, his sun-bleached hair, and his vivid, bluish-green eyes. However, Finny turns to him and says that everyone is looking at *him*, saying that Gene has acquired a "movie-star tan" and playfully accusing him of showing off.

Gene's belief that most friendships at Devon are built upon a sense of rivalry is worth noting, since it contrasts with Finny's genuine sense of good will. When he thinks to himself that Finny is too good to be his rival, Gene's admiration for his friend takes on a slight bitterness, as if he jealously believes that Finny is so out of his league that he can't even compare himself to him. This is an important dynamic to track as the novel progresses, since it will eventually influence how Gene treats Finny and—later—how he views his own actions.



Once again, Gene fails to voice his opinions because he doesn't want to risk losing Finny's approval. Although he feels competitive with Finny and even seems to resent him in certain ways, he's forever willing to do whatever he wants, sacrificing his own agency just to please his best friend. After all, he's proud to be Finny's best friend and has founded his entire identity on this role, so he won't do anything to put it in jeopardy.



Again, Gene finds himself admiring Finny and the way he commands everyone's attention. When Finny compliments him for the same thing, it suggests either that Gene doesn't give himself enough credit or that Finny can sense how much Gene admires him and therefore tries to make him feel better by saying something nice. Either way, it's apparent that their relational dynamic is perhaps a bit more complex than the average bond between two friends.



As they settle down to sleep among the dunes, Finny thanks Gene for coming with him, saying that he hopes he's having a good time. He also says he's well aware that he couldn't do this sort of thing with just anybody, adding that this outing is only something he could ever do with a best friend. "Which is what you are," he adds after a pause. Gene knows that this is a very brave thing to say, since speaking so emotionally and openly at **the Devon School** is usually seen as a form of social suicide. Gene wishes he could tell Finny that he, too, is his best friend, but he finds himself unable to say this, stopped by some mysterious, tacit feeling—a feeling that "contains the truth."

Gene is accustomed to a tight-lipped, unemotional way of moving through the world, one that he thinks is required in the excessively masculine world of the Devon School. Speaking openly about one's feelings for a friend, he thinks, is dangerous because it exposes a person to all kinds of ridicule and judgment. And yet, he desperately wishes that he could tell Finny how much he cares about him, wanting to match Finny's openness. However, he can't bring himself to do this because he's stopped by a feeling that "contains the truth." Gene—and, for that matter, Knowles—never clarifies what this "truth" is, so the meaning of this moment remains ambiguous. However, it's reasonable to consider the possibility that the "truth" to which Gene refers in this moment is that he has romantic feelings for Finny, feelings he isn't ready (or willing) to acknowledge. Even if this isn't the case, though, what's overwhelmingly clear is that Gene is afraid of his feelings for Finny—a dynamic that impedes upon their relationship and keeps Gene from being open with his friend.



CHAPTER 4

Gene wakes up early the next morning and watches the sun fill the sky. Finny is still asleep, but when he finally wakes, he insists upon taking one last swim in the ocean before they leave. Gene, for his part, wants to get going as soon as possible because he's worried about missing his trigonometry exam, but Finny pays no attention. Finally, they make their way home, and Gene narrowly makes it to class in time but fails the test because he didn't study. Frustrated, he returns to the dorm and starts studying, wanting to make up for flunking. Trying to pull him away from his studies, Finny tells Gene that he works too hard, accusing him of wanting to be the class's valedictorian. At first, Gene denies this, but then wonders why this would be such a bad thing.

After their escapade to the beach, Gene resents Finny for causing him to fail his test. Of course, it isn't just Finny's fault that he didn't study, since Gene could have decided to stay and focus on his schoolwork. In fact, he didn't even protest when Finny suggested that they take their bikes to the beach. And yet, he now sees his own failure—his own decision to blow off his studies—as Finny's fault, proving once again that his relationship with Finny fluctuates between admiration and scorn.



Gene's conversation with Finny about academic performances makes him consider the nature of their friendship. He senses that Finny doesn't want him to excel in his studies. In fact, he thinks, he and Finny are actually rivals. Because Finny isn't as good in school as him, he doesn't want Gene to succeed. And though Finny is well-liked and the school's best athlete, Gene realizes that they would be "even" if he himself were to become valedictorian.

In the aftermath of his failed exam, Gene hatches a resentful theory that he and Finny are rivals. This, of course, is based on nothing but his own feelings of jealousy and competition, not necessarily on anything that Finny actually feels. And yet, his theory is convincing enough that it's hard for him—and even for readers—to dismiss it. In this regard, he allows his frustration to completely destabilize his bond with Finny.



Gene asks Finny if he'd mind if he *did* become valedictorian, and Finny sarcastically says that he'd commit suicide out of envy—a statement that Gene takes seriously. He then finds himself quite upset, thinking that he doesn't actually have anyone at **Devon** (or anywhere, for that matter) whom he can trust, since he now sees Finny as his rival. The only consolation that comes from this thought is that he and Finny are already even because they both want to be better than the other. However, he suddenly convinces himself that Finny has been trying to keep him from succeeding in his studies, distracting him from work so that he won't excel beyond him. From this point on, then, he applies himself feverously to school, and though he now sees Finny as his rival, he continues to get along with him very well.

As the final exams of the summer session approach, Gene feels underprepared, despite the amount of studying he's been doing. One thing that continues to interfere is the Suicide Society, since Finny frequently interrupts his studies so they can go jump out of **the tree**. And yet, Gene is unwilling to let Finny go without him, knowing that this, too, is part of their rivalry. One night, though, he acts especially angry when Finny fetches him to go to the tree. In a characteristically jovial mood, Finny informs him that Leper will finally be making the jump. Gene slams his book shut and begrudgingly prepares to go, but Finny acts as if he doesn't understand why he's mad. When Gene tells him that he's tired of the Suicide Society interfering with his schoolwork, Finny tells him to stay.

Gene is caught off-guard by Finny's suggestion that he keep studying instead of jumping from **the tree**. But Finny goes on, explaining that he should pursue his studies because he's naturally good in school. Finny says he would apply himself in a similar regard, but he knows that it's no use—he'll never excel like Gene. Hearing this, Gene insists upon coming to the tree, but Finny urges him to stay and study. Nonetheless, Gene leaves his textbooks behind and walks with Finny across campus, thinking on the way that Finny has never actually been jealous of him. There is, he sees, no rivalry between them at all because he isn't "of the same quality" as Finny.

What makes Gene's theory about his relationship with Finny so hard to ignore is that it makes sense. After all, it's plausible that Finny doesn't want him to become the valedictorian. Even if this were the case, though, it's clear that Gene is taking the idea of their rivalry much more seriously than Finny. If Finny even did feel competitive in his friendship with Gene, it's unlikely that he would obsess over it in the way that Gene does by applying himself so feverishly to his studies. This is because Finny's brand of competition is generally good-natured and fun, whereas Gene's is bitter and scornful. In other words, Gene's envious streak threatens to upend his entire relationship with Finny, whereas Finny's competitive side is casual and full of goodwill.



Gene's tense behavior in this scene demonstrates the extent to which his sense of jealous rivalry has infected his relationship with Finny. Whereas Finny simply wants to have a good time, Gene wants to triumph over his friend. However, he can't bring himself to let Finny go to the tree by himself, thinking that this would also be a form of losing. In turn, readers see just how obsessed he has become with the idea that he and Finny are rivals, letting the notion destroy his ability to simply get along with his friend.



Finally, Gene recognizes that Finny doesn't see him as a rival. When Finny earnestly tells him to focus on his studies and compliments him for being good in school, he sees that his best friend has no interest in sabotaging his academic performance. In keeping with this, he realizes that Finny doesn't see him as a competitor. Instead of seeing this as a good thing, though, he broods, thinking that Finny doesn't think of him as a rival because he's not good enough to be his rival. Of course, it's more likely that Finny simply sees Gene as a close friend and therefore doesn't harbor any animosity toward him, but Gene assumes the worst, thereby pitting himself against Finny even though Finny doesn't have anything against him.



When they reach **the tree** and greet the other members of the Suicide Society, Finny suggests that he and Gene should make the first jump together, plunging into the water at the same time. Not caring anymore what happens, Gene agrees and lets Finny climb up the tree first, following closely behind. When they reach the limb that hangs over the bank, Finny walks out onto it and instructs Gene to follow him so that they can jump simultaneously. Still holding the trunk, Gene takes a step. Then his knees bend and the branch bounces, knocking Finny off balance. Time seems to stretch for an instant as Finny twirls around to look at Gene, wearing an expression of intrigue before **falling** off the branch and landing on the bank with a gut-wrenching sound. Fearlessly, Gene jumps into the river.

By telling Gene that it's all right if he wants to stay in his dorm and study, Finny makes it clear that he doesn't see him as a rival. As if to further demonstrate this, he suggests that they jump off the tree at the same time, clearly wanting to re-solidify their bond as best friends with nothing between them. However, both of these developments upset Gene because they make it clear that Finny doesn't see him as a competitor—a thought that enrages him because he believes it means that Finny doesn't think Gene could compete with him. These considerations are all relevant to this moment because it is unclear how, exactly, Finny falls. In his telling of the story, Gene simply states that his knees bend on the branch, destabilizing it. Whether or not this is intentional is hard to say, though Gene's feelings of jealousy and resentment suggest that he might indeed have meant to send Finny hurdling to the riverbank.



CHAPTER 5

Nobody is allowed to visit Finny in the infirmary, where he lies after having decimated his leg, the bone messily broken. Everyone at the school is profoundly affected by the accident, especially the teachers, who find it particularly unfair that one of the few young men capable of enjoying an innocent summer in 1942 should have to face such pain and hardship. Though nobody accuses Gene of causing the **fall**, he wonders if he purposefully made Finny lose his balance by shaking the limb. Alone in their room one evening, he decides to try on Finny's clothing. Finny is constantly stealing Gene's clothes, but now Gene reaches for Finny's pink shirt and pulls it over his head. When he looks in the mirror, he's astounded by what he sees: he looks exactly like Phineas, and this makes him feel like he'll never have to grapple with his own identity again.

That Gene wonders whether or not he purposefully made Finny fall suggests that, even if he did do it, it wasn't necessarily a conscious decision. Rather, his pent-up resentment and jealousy might have led him to shake the tree limb. In keeping with this, he dresses up in Finny's clothes and feels a certain kind of relief, as if he has been waiting to simply become Finny but hasn't necessarily realized it until this moment. By destroying Finny, then, Gene has subconsciously tried to inhabit his best friend's identity.



One morning, the school physician, Dr. Stanpole, informs Gene that Finny is well enough to receive visitors. Gene is hesitant at first, but Dr. Stanpole insists that it would be good for Finny to see a friend. On their way to the infirmary, Stanpole says that the break in Finny's leg was very bad but that he'll most likely walk again someday. When he registers Gene's bewilderment that he would even say such a thing, Dr. Stanpole explains that Finny will never be able to play sports again. Because of this, he needs a friend now more than ever, and Stanpole hopes Gene might be able to help Finny come to terms with this unfortunate reality. Unable to help himself, Gene begins to cry, but Dr. Stanpole tells him to be strong for Finny, who asked for him specifically.

It's worth remembering in this moment that one of Finny's defining traits is his impressive athleticism. For this reason, it will undoubtedly devastate him when he learns that he'll never be able to play sports again, especially since he thinks of all athletic pursuit as an "absolute good." Despite these thoughts, he will no longer be able to partake in such activities, meaning that Gene has thoroughly ruined his best friend's ability to experience the thing he loves most in life. This is why Gene breaks down in tears when Stanpole tells him that Finny will never play sports again. Simply put, he fully grasps the gravity of his actions.



Gene pauses before fully entering Finny's room, and Finny tells him to come inside, joking that Gene looks worse than him. He then asks why he looks so upset, and Gene doesn't know what to say. Speechless, he finally asks Finny what happened in **the tree**, wanting to know how he fell. In response, Finny says that he simply fell, that the branch shook and that he lost his balance. He also notes that he turned to look at Gene and tried to reach out to him. "To drag me down too!" Gene erupts, but Finny just gazes at him and explains that he only wanted to stabilize himself. Getting ahold of himself, Gene claims to have tried to reach out for him, but Finny says that he can only remember the look on his face—it was strange, he says, a look of total shock.

Finny points out that the look Gene had on his face when he fell is exactly the look he's wearing right now. Gene claims that this is because he's shocked, but Finny doesn't understand why Gene is acting so upset, as if it happened to him. When Gene says that it practically *did* happen to him because he was right there, Finny tells him that he knows, saying that he remembers the entire thing. In the pause that follows this statement, silence stretches between the two boys before Gene suddenly breaks it, asking if Finny remembers what made him **fall**. In response, Finny speaks with uncharacteristic confusion, ultimately—in a long, discursive way—implying that Gene may have caused his fall. Before he commits to this sentiment, though, he takes it back, apologizing for suspecting his friend of anything. "I just fell," he says.

Gene has no idea what to say, since Finny has just apologized to him for suspecting what Gene himself knows is the truth. Considering this, Gene admires Finny's belief in friendship, realizing that Finny would never accuse a friend of something malicious without knowing for sure what happened. In his place, Gene knows, Finny would confess, so he stands and begins to tell the truth. He says that he must admit something terrible, something that Finny is going to detest, but before he can say anything more, Dr. Stanpole enters and sends him out of the infirmary. The following day, Stanpole says that Finny isn't up to seeing visitors, and it isn't long before he's sent back to his parents in Boston.

When Gene momentarily accuses Finny of wanting to "drag" him down too, he reveals that he hasn't fully let go of the idea that he and Finny are rivals, despite all that's happened. However, Finny just looks at him in response and calmly tells him that he simply wanted to regain his balance. Once again, then, readers see how off-base Gene is to think that Finny houses any animosity for him. Furthermore, readers will remember that Finny reached out to stabilize Gene when they were in opposite positions. This only emphasizes how heartless it was of Gene to send Finny falling to the ground.



Although Finny has already said that the only thing he can remember about his fall is the look on Gene's face, he now claims to remember the entire thing. However, he can't bring himself to fully accuse Gene. This is most likely because he could never imagine why his best friend would want to hurt him. Unlike Gene, Finny doesn't feel any bitterness in their friendship. Instead, he sees Gene as his best friend and, therefore, can't fathom the idea that he might have caused his fall. All the same, though, that he even brings this idea up suggests that he knows—on some level, at least—what really happened.



An optimist and idealist, Finny believes in the sanctity of friendship, which is why he can't bring himself to fully accuse Gene. After all, this would mean suspecting his best friend of malice, thereby tarnishing their bond. Of course, he's right to suspect that Gene caused his fall, but he denies this because the idea goes against what he sees as the purity of friendship. To make matters more complicated, Gene loses his chance to tell Finny the truth, effectively making it harder for him to be honest with Finny, since he will now have to apologize for leading Finny to believe that Gene is innocent.



The summer session ends, and Gene goes home for the rest of August before heading back to **Devon**. His trains are delayed on his return trip, and he suddenly is filled with the desire to see Finny, so he heads toward Boston instead of catching his final train back to campus. When he arrives, Finny greets him warmly and excitedly, wanting to know all about Gene's vacation. After some conversation, he tells Finny that he's been thinking a lot about him and the accident. Finny calls him "loyal" for spending his summer vacation thinking about such things, but Gene goes on, saying that he can't get the accident off his mind because he's the one who caused it to happen. Finny asks what he means, and Gene admits that he bounced the limb, but Finny refuses to accept this.

Insisting that he made **the tree** branch move, Gene stands and loudly states that he was responsible for Finny's **fall**. Calmly, Finny informs him that he'll hit him if he doesn't sit down and stop saying such things, but Gene incredulously points out that Finny couldn't hit him even if he wanted to, since he can't stand. Finny then tells him to shut up, threatening to kill him, and this comment resonates with Gene, who says that now Finny knows why he caused him to fall—this, he says, is exactly how he felt when he bounced the limb. Hearing this, Finny insists that he has no such feelings, telling Gene to go away because he's making him sick. Suddenly, Gene senses that he's only causing Finny more pain, and he questions whether or not he truly sent Finny falling to the ground on purpose.

Whether or not Gene meant to cause Finny's **fall**, he realizes that it will hurt Finny even more if he knows that this is what happened. For this reason, he desperately tries to take back what he's said, saying that he's overtired and that he's not making any sense. In a matter-of-fact way, Finny tells him not to worry about what he's said, and then Gene stands to leave, saying that he's already an entire day late for school. Just before he goes, Finny asks if he's going to start following rules, and Gene promises that he won't, though he privately notes that this is the biggest lie he's told all day.

As time passes, it becomes harder and harder for Gene to tell the truth. This is largely due to the fact that Finny has decided to drop all of his suspicions, even going out of his way to praise Gene's "loyalty" in a way that only makes it more difficult for him to admit what he did. Interestingly enough, this appears to be a defense mechanism for Finny, as made evident when he refuses to listen when Gene tells him that he caused the fall. After all, Finny has already lost his ability to play sports, so he doesn't want to also lose his best friend. For this reason, he actively denies what Gene tells him.



As Finny tries to deny that Gene meant to hurt him, he becomes more and more upset. When he finally expresses outrage and threatens to hurt Gene, Gene suggests that this is exactly what he himself felt that day on the tree. This aligns with the idea that he caused Finny to fall because he let his envy and resentment build into a violent rage. However, this isn't actually what Finny is experiencing. When Gene finally sees this, he recognizes that Finny is only mad because Gene is adding a new and emotional element of pain to the pain that Finny already has to endure. Most interestingly, he begins to wonder if he actually caused Finny to fall on purpose, acknowledging to himself that his actions were subconscious. In turn, readers see how toxic jealousy and resentment can be to a friendship.



Finny's willingness to dismiss what Gene has said signals his own desire to deny the implications of what happened that fateful evening in the tree. Now that he's more or less come to terms with the physical aspects of his injury, he doesn't want to consider the emotional implications surrounding Gene's involvement in the accident. Instead, he'd prefer to believe that Gene—his best friend—would never do anything to hurt him, thereby demonstrating his idealistic belief in the inherent goodness of friendship.



CHAPTER 6

When Gene returns to **Devon**, he feels as if the calm ease of the summer session has fled campus. It is no longer a peaceful haven, but a place consumed by energy and order. During the first chapel service of the year, he and the other students notice that five of their teachers from the previous years have left for the war. All the beauty and peace and tranquility of the summer, Gene feels, ended the night Finny fell from **the tree**, and now he must set himself to the rote habits of the traditional school year. Worse, his room feels lonely, since Finny is still recovering at home. Across the hall, a popular and well-rounded student named Brinker Hadley has moved into Leper's old room—a development that would normally please Gene but does little to stir him. Leper, for his part, has been moved to a remote room across campus.

Gene decides to visit Brinker, but stops before he enters, realizing that he doesn't want to see how Leper's former room has changed. Instead of saying hello to Brinker, then, he turns around and goes to the Crew House because he has decided to be the assistant crew manager. On his way, he sees **the Devon River** and thinks of Finny, though he's actually headed toward the Naguamsett River, which the Devon joins before entering the ocean. When he reaches the Crew House, Cliff Quackenbush, the crew manager, admonishes him for being late. Most people dislike Quackenbush because he's abrasive and enervating, but Gene doesn't care because he has decided to resign himself to the inglorious job of assistant crew manager, regardless of how unpleasant it is.

At the end of the day, Quackenbush tries to understand why Gene is suddenly interested in managing teams, which is a job mostly filled by people who aren't athletic themselves. Gene gets annoyed as Quackenbush peppers him with questions, wanting to be left alone so he can work mindlessly. However, Quackenbush won't leave him alone, and Gene feels bad for him because he sees how desperate Quackenbush is to assert himself, since people normally overlook him so readily. However, when Quackenbush insinuates that Gene must only want to work as an assistant manager because he is "maimed," Gene hits him in the face. In response, Quackenbush locks his arms around him and they both fall into the dirty Naguamsett River.

Everything about Gene's new existence at Devon has changed in the aftermath of Finny's fall. As he tries to accustom himself to the new patterns of the regular academic calendar, he thinks wistfully about the innocent freedom he enjoyed with Finny over the summer, as if their youthful joy has disappeared along with Finny's perfect physical condition. In this regard, Finny's fall from the tree symbolizes Gene's fall from innocence, as he plummets from the happiness of childhood into the harsh, strict world of adulthood, toward which he is constantly hurdling, destined not only for maturity, but also for war.



It's worth noting that, although Gene was never better than Finny at sports, he is a rather athletic young man. It's surprising, then, that he has decided to be the assistant crew manager instead of playing a sport—an obvious show of solidarity with Finny, whose athletic career he ruined. In turn, readers see the ways in which Gene's guilt influences his decisions in the aftermath of Finny's fall. While he resists the changes all around him, he makes great changes to his own life as a way of punishing himself for what he's done.



Quackenbush's claim that Gene must be "maimed" suggests that he thinks Gene is somehow physically unable to play sports, the assumption being that he wouldn't want to be assistant crew manager for any other reason. Of course, the only reason Gene wants to be assistant crew manager in the first place is to make up for having "maimed" Finny, which is why he responds so harshly to Quackenbush's derogatory use of the word. Simply put, Gene takes it upon himself to avenge Finny even though he's the one who hurt Finny in the first place.



Although Gene wants to think that he hit Quackenbush to defend Finny, he knows that he really did it for himself. On his way back to the dorm, he runs into Mr. Ludsbury, the man in charge of his building. Mr. Ludsbury scolds him for taking advantage of Mr. Prud'homme over the summer and says that now things will return to order. He also tells him that he has received a phone call, so Gene hurries back to the dorm and calls the number Mr. Ludsbury wrote down for him. Finny answers and asks Gene if they've replaced him with a new roommate. Gene assures him that they didn't, and Finny says that he knew he could count on Gene to prevent the teachers from letting another boy take his place.

Apologizing for doubting that Gene would save his place, Finny moves on to other topics, asking what sports Gene is going out for this year. When Gene tells him that he was thinking of being assistant crew manager, Finny is appalled. He asks what this has to do with sports, and Gene privately thinks about how it has *nothing* to do with sports, which is exactly why he likes it. This is because he never wants to play sports again. When Dr. Stanpole said, "Sports are finished," Gene felt as if the statement applied to him, not just to Finny. Furthermore, he doesn't trust himself to play sports anymore, unnerved by the violence that now seems inherent in any athletic event. After all, there is a war afoot, and everything around Gene is infused with the threat of violence.

Not wanting to explain his thoughts about sports to Finny, Gene simply says that he's too busy to go out for any teams. However, Finny rejects this idea, saying that Gene will have to play sports because he himself cannot. As soon as he says this, Gene senses that he has finally gotten the chance to be part of Finny.

Despite Gene's desire to defend Finny's honor, he can't quite convince himself that he admirably avenged his friend. This is because he knows that he's the reason Finny got hurt in the first place. No matter what he does to make up for this, he'll never be able to change the fact that he injured Finny and changed the course of his life. Thankfully, though, Finny himself is apparently eager to put this ugly past behind them, either intentionally putting the matter out of his mind or denying it so fiercely that he legitimately convinces himself that Gene did nothing to harm him.



Everywhere Gene looks, he is affronted by the possibility of violence. Of course, the looming presence of the war ensures that the threat of violence is ever-present, but now he even associates sports with this kind of malice because of what he did to Finny. Indeed, he no longer trusts himself to engage in physical activities that pit him against others, apparently aware that his competitive side is what led him to act against Finny. For this reason, he wants to punish himself by doing only things that Finny would be able to do, too, trying to atone for his mistakes despite the fact that this does nothing to change what has happened and doesn't even please Finny.



Having put the past behind them, all Finny wants is for Gene to succeed in the activities in which he himself can no longer participate. Instead of resenting Gene for causing his fall, he denies that this happened and focuses on living vicariously through his friend. This, in turn, is why he finds it ridiculous that Gene would want to be assistant crew manager instead of playing an actual sport. What's more, Gene finally gets to merge his identity with Finny's—something he has always wanted to do.



CHAPTER 7

When Gene returns to his room, Brinker Hadley pays him a visit. Brinker, a gregarious and likable young man, admires Gene's room and congratulates him on having such nice accommodations all to himself. When he jokes that Gene purposefully injured Finny so he could live alone in their room, Gene is seized with fear and discomfort, telling Brinker to stop speaking so absurdly. Still, though, Brinker presses on with his joke, suggesting that the truth hurts. Left with no choice, Gene laughs and acts like Brinker is on to something. Hoping to change the topic, though, he suggests that they go down to the Butt Room, a filthy room in the basement where the students are allowed to smoke.

Once in the Butt Room, Brinker continues to joke about Gene's cunning plan. In front of the other smoking students, Gene is once more forced to play along, this time confessing to the crime and describing what happened, exaggerating his maliciousness so that everyone understands he's joking. Just when he's about to explain how he caused Finny to **fall**, though, he stops, unable to go on.

Suddenly, Gene turns to the youngest boy in the room, who has been boisterously playing along as part of Brinker's mock courtroom. "What did I do then?" he asks, inviting the boy to fill in the blanks. When the boy uncomfortably suggests that he pushed Finny, Gene makes fun of him for ruining the joke, and the others laugh while the boy fumes, knowing that Gene has made him look stupid. On Gene's way out, he hears one of the students remark that he came all the way to the Butt Room but didn't even smoke.

Brinker's joke unnerves Gene because it touches on the truth. Of course, Gene didn't injure Finny to have the dorm room to himself, but he does suspect himself of having hurt his friend on purpose. As a result, Brinker's words cause him to worry that everyone in the school must suspect him of wrongdoing. This, in turn, might destabilize his relationship with Finny, which has apparently survived the incident, though this is mostly due to Finny's willingness to deny what really happened. Unlike Finny, though, people like Brinker have no emotional attachment to Gene and thus have no reason to overlook his actions.



Although he doesn't necessarily want to, it's easy enough for Gene to go along with Brinker's joke, especially since this is apparently the only way to ensure that the others won't actually suspect him of causing Finny's fall. Because he did cause the fall, though, he can't bring himself to fully commit to this joke. After all, it's not a joke, and this fact pains him greatly, forcing him to face the truth in a way that makes him deeply uncomfortable.



Gene manages to wriggle his way out of this uncomfortable situation by turning on a younger boy, using the naïve student's relative insecurity and over-eagerness to frame the entire joke as stupid and immature. In doing so, he acts like the conversation is beneath him, as if he's too adult to continue paying attention to such a shallow joke. This, however, is nothing more than a cunning calculation that helps him preserve an illusion of innocence, ultimately demonstrating just how manipulative Gene can be. And yet, despite his slyness, it's worth noting that his fellow students still seem suspicious of him, as evidenced by one boy's comment that Gene didn't even smoke a cigarette before leaving the Butt Room. Simply distracting people from the truth, it seems, will not save Gene from scrutiny, regardless of whether or not Finny himself chooses to believe him.



As **Autumn** progresses, Gene is relieved that none of his fellow students say anything more about him causing Finny's **fall**. Meanwhile, snow comes early, and news of the war continues to encroach upon the campus. Because so many men in the area have gone off to the war, Gene and his classmates help with nearby jobs like apple picking and snow shoveling. During one particularly heavy snowfall, the regional railroad lines are blocked because there aren't enough workers to clear the tracks. Accordingly, **the Devon** administration asks for student volunteers to shovel away the snow, and nearly everyone signs up—everyone, that is, except for Leper, who Gene suspects didn't listen during the announcement. After all, Gene thinks, Leper is always in his own little world, blissfully unaware of what's happening around him.

On his way to shovel the tracks, Gene takes a shortcut through the woods and finds Leper, who is "touring" the area on cross-country skis and looking for a beaver dam. Preoccupied by this task, he doesn't even think to ask Gene what he's doing until after they've talked about the beaver dam, and he seems unperturbed when Gene reminds him that everyone except him has volunteered to shovel the railways. At this point, Gene says farewell to Leper and meets up with the others, spending a miserable and gray day shoveling dirty snow until finally the tracks are clear. When they finish, a train car rolls by, and the students are surprised to see that it's full of soldiers who don't look all that different than them.

On the train ride back to campus, Gene and the others talk about joining the military. While everyone speaks eagerly about wanting to enlist, Quackenbush says that he's going to finish his studies before entering the military. Hearing this, Brinker and the others make fun of him, calling him a spy for the enemy. Then, when they reach campus, they spot Leper as he slides slowly by on his skis. Brinker makes a sarcastic remark about him, but Gene jumps in and asks if Leper found the beaver dam, not wanting his friend to get made fun of by the others. With a smile, Leper says that he did indeed find the dam and offers to show Gene the pictures he took of it.

Once again, the presence of World War II is undeniable in Gene's life, even if he himself isn't in the military. Whereas he felt somewhat insulated from the war during the summer session, he now senses its influence in a very real way and even contributes to it by doing jobs that have been vacated by men who joined the military. In this regard, he has more or less lost his adolescent innocence once and for all. Leper, on the other hand, remains firmly rooted in the blissful ignorance that used to protect Gene from truly engaging with the harsh realities of the outside world. Instead of joining Leper in this mindset, though, Gene sees his friend as out of touch, even if he doesn't hold this against him.



The contrast between Leper's blissful ignorance and Gene's engagement with the outside world is stark in this section, as Gene recognizes just how unbothered Leper is by the fact that there's a war going on. He, on the other hand, has become involved in the war effort, and though this involvement is still removed from the actual fighting, the war seems closer than ever when Gene realizes that he has just helped a train of soldiers get to their destination—a fact that underscores the overwhelming reality of the war, which is no longer just a remote and abstract concept in his life.



Gene is no longer steeped in the same blissful ignorance as Leper, but he doesn't fault his friend for ignoring the influence of the war. Rather, he respects Leper's ability to focus on things that have nothing to do with the outside world, as if he himself yearns to do the same. However, he lost his own innocent purity when the summer ended and Finny fell from the tree, so all he can do is admire Leper's mindset from afar, unable to embody it himself.



After listening to Leper, Brinker laments the fact that he's forced to go to a "school for photographers of beaver dams" when there's a world war happening. Walking away with Gene, he declares that he's going to enlist the following day. This sends a shock through Gene, who realizes that he wants to do the exact same thing because this will help him forget about the past. Why continue his education while watching the tranquility of the summer session fade when he could actively join the war effort and move on with his life, he wonders. Filled with a new sense of resolve, he bounds upstairs, swings open his door, and finds Phineas sitting at his desk. Suddenly, all his resolutions evaporate at the sight of his best friend.

If Gene can't return to the kind of innocence that Leper exemplifies, he thinks, he will fully embrace the harsh realities of the outside world. To do so, he will join the military, no longer delaying his inevitable involvement in World War II. As soon as he makes this decision, though, he regains a part of his adolescent innocence: Finny. Seeing his best friend back in the dorm room gives him hope that he'll be able to recapture the unbothered happiness of the previous summer, even if Finny's fall has forced him to acknowledge the ugliness not only of the world at large, but of his own identity, too.



CHAPTER 8

Finny immediately mocks the clothes Gene wore to shovel the railways, jovially making fun of the way he looks until Gene finally strips to his final layer, an undershirt. This, Finny says, is what Gene should have worn all day—just the undershirt, which looks good on him. Moving on, Finny laments the fact that **Devon** has gotten rid of all its maids. When Gene reminds him that this is because of the war, Finny hardly pays attention and continues to complain. This bothers Gene, who has no problem dispensing with certain privileges in order to contribute to the war effort.

Gene's frustration at Finny for complaining about giving up certain luxuries because of the war suggests that, although he has gladly forgotten all about his newfound resolution to enlist in the military, he isn't necessarily willing to completely force the war out of his mind. Because Finny himself won't be able to join the military, though, it makes sense that he would be eager to ignore its overall influence.



Finny is on crutches, but this doesn't shock Gene as much as it could have, since Finny broke his ankle the previous year while playing football, so Gene has seen him on crutches before. When they go to bed, Gene silently prays that Finny will continue to remain unsentimental about his new condition. After three minutes, though, Finny interrupts him and starts pontificating as he always has. He's still talking when Gene finally falls asleep.

Finny's high spirits once more indicate that his and Gene's friendship will survive more or less unharmed by what happened between them in the aftermath of his fall. Although it seemed as if Finny suspected Gene of causing the accident (and even heard Gene admit to it), he now appears to have put such thoughts behind him, most likely willing himself to deny these ideas in order to continue his friendship with Gene. This, in turn, suggests that their relationship means quite a lot to him.



The next morning, Brinker bounds into the room and is about to ask Gene if he's ready to enlist when he sees Finny. Casually, Finny asks Brinker what he was going to say, but Brinker doesn't respond right away, instead joking with Gene that his plan to oust Finny from the room has failed. Finny asks Gene what Brinker's talking about, but Gene tries to act like he has no idea. Still, Finny presses, so Gene says that Brinker has come to get him so they can enlist together. With this, even Brinker forgets about the joke, and Finny turns a wild look on Gene, asking him if he's really going to join the military. As Gene stumbles for a response, he thinks about how he's never seen Finny give him such a look.

Finny's shock in this moment suggests that he doesn't want Gene to join the military. After all, he has just come back to Devon and has most likely worked hard to put all negative thoughts about Gene out of his mind so that they can resume their friendship. If Gene is going to leave him, though, this will all be for nothing. Furthermore, it's worth remembering that Finny used to talk about the war rather frequently before he injured himself, and although his engagement with the conflict was just as abstract and remote as Gene's, he clearly romanticized the idea of one day joining the military. Consequently, he would undoubtedly feel left out if Gene and Brinker enlisted and left him by himself at school.



As Gene and Brinker awkwardly try to explain to Finny that they were thinking of enlisting, Finny declares that he's going to go take a shower. Crutching away, he refuses their offers to help, though it's apparent that he isn't supposed to get his cast wet. When they persist, he viciously tells them he can do it on his own, at which point Gene realizes that Finny is upset that Gene might leave him alone at **Devon**. Finny, he senses, needs him, and this thought banishes all other considerations from his mind. Thinking this way, he turns on Brinker and tells him that he'd never dream of enlisting with him. As Brinker tries to make sense of this sudden reversal, Finny breaks into a wide smile, and he and Gene start making fun of Brinker for thinking that Gene would ever go into the military with him.

It is winter at **Devon**, which means that Finny has to navigate icy walkways and treacherous berms of snow. Of course, he's athletic on his crutches, but Gene can still see how tiring it is for him to make his way to class. Nonetheless, Finny declares that winter must love him because he loves winter—an idea that outlines his entire worldview, though Gene privately notes that Finny has had plenty of experiences that contradict this outlook. When they reach his classroom on Finny's first day back, Finny suggests that he and Gene skip class, directing them to the gym. This requires him to crutch over a vast amount of ice, thoroughly winding him. When they arrive, Finny sits in the locker room and admires it as if it's some sort of sanctuary. "Same old place, isn't it?" he asks, but Gene replies, "Not exactly."

In response to Gene's comment that the locker room doesn't feel like the "same old place," Finny simply says that now Gene will have to take his place as the school's star athlete. He then casually tells Gene to do chin-ups before asking which sports he ended up trying out for. Again, Gene tells him that he didn't go out for any sports, arguing that such things seem trivial during wartime. Aghast, Finny rejects this notion, admonishing Gene for getting swept up in all the talk about the war. In fact, he claims to not really believe that a world war is even happening. Outlining this unconventional viewpoint, he says that each generation of adults tries to suppress the youth. This happened in the '20s with Prohibition and then in the '30s with the Great Depression. Now, he claims, it's happening with the war.

What Finny wants more than anything is to know that Gene cares about him. When Gene recognizes this, he immediately renounces Brinker's suggestion that they enlist in the military, proving that he will do anything for Finny. In doing so, he once again embodies the innocence of the previous summer, acting as if the war is far, far away, even though he himself saw how real it is just the day before. In turn, readers see once again how strong Finny and Gene's bond really is, even after the tragic accident. Indeed, it is strong enough to eclipse all else, including the looming presence of World War II.



Finny's idealistic, optimistic worldview is still intact, even after his accident. However, Finny's fall has turned Gene into something of a skeptic, since the event forced him to recognize certain ugly elements of his own identity. For this reason, he finds it hard to wrap his head around Finny's belief that everything that he loves must also love him back. Similarly, he can't bring himself to agree that the locker room feels like the "same old place," since the room itself represents the school's athletic accomplishments and, therefore, brings to mind the fact that Devon's most talented athlete is no longer able to compete. Unlike Finny, Gene can't push this from his mind, since he's the one responsible for this dismal reality.



Unable to join the war himself, Finny ignores its influence altogether. This is very obviously a defense mechanism, something he uses to make himself feel better about the fact that he will soon be forced to sit and watch as his peers join the military, which is something he wanted to do. What's more, he recognizes that he can't even play sports, so he decides to live vicariously through Gene, wanting him to become the school's best athlete. Interestingly enough, though, he doesn't want Gene to join the war, despite the fact that this is what he always imagined he himself would do. This is because he doesn't want Gene to leave him at Devon, once again underlining how much their relationship means to him.



According to Finny, the old men of America don't want young people taking their jobs and having a good time, so they've lied and said that there's a war going on. While young men like themselves join the military and institutions reduce their spending, then, these old men dine lavishly on expensive steak, having a great time while everyone else is miserable. Gene refuses to believe this, asking Finny questions that get him more and more riled up about what he's saying. Finally, Gene asks why Finny—of all people—would know this when nobody else does. "Because I've suffered," Finny screams, and then a tense, shocked silence hangs between them in the locker room.

Slowly, Gene walks to the exercise bar and begins doing chin-ups, not knowing how else to break the silence. As he does this, Finny looks up and emotionlessly tells him to do 30. Gene has never even done ten chin-ups, but he doesn't think about this. When he does his 12th, he realizes that Finny has been counting along with him, and as the numbers climb, Finny gets more and more excited, eventually calling out the numbers and standing up to watch. Gene completes all 30, and Finny chimes out the number in a tone of pure delight. In this moment, Gene realizes that Finny was just as taken aback by his own vehemence as Gene was. Sitting back down, Finny confides in him, saying that he always dreamed of qualifying for the 1944 Olympic Games. Because he can't, though, he has decided that Gene will instead.

Gene insists that there won't be any Olympics in 1944 because of the war, but Finny tells him to leave his "fantasy life" out of this discussion, so Gene agrees to train with Finny for the Games. Of course, he doesn't believe Finny's theory that World War II is a hoax, but he slowly begins to consider how humorous and absurd it would be if Finny were indeed correct. So begins what becomes a running joke between them, as Finny makes sarcastic comments to Gene whenever people bring up some new development in the war. Gene even suspects that the teachers at **Devon** are using the war as an excuse to motivate the students to be disciplined and rigorous—two things he knows the school would try to encourage regardless of whether or not there was a war afoot.

Despite Finny's overall good attitude, he can't quite hide the fact that he has been through a traumatic experience. In this moment, he acknowledges that his fall from the tree caused him great suffering and ultimately impacted his entire life. For this reason, he concocts a ludicrous theory about the war, doing so as a way of denying the fact that the conflict now stands for all the things in life in which he cannot partake.



When Gene does 30 chin-ups, he demonstrates his loyalty to Finny, showing his friend that—no matter what has happened between them—their friendship means more to him than anything else, including the war. Accordingly, Finny sees that Gene truly does care about him, so he opens up by telling him his dashed dream of qualifying for the Olympics. What's more, when he says that now Gene will qualify instead of him, readers see that Gene truly has become part of Finny in the aftermath of the accident. Whereas Gene previously felt as if he were competing with Finny, the two boys now merge their identities. Instead of establishing his own sense of self, then, Gene gravitates toward Finny's identity.



Although Gene doesn't believe Finny's conspiracy theory about the war, he slowly embraces it. At first, he does this simply to please his best friend, for whom he would seemingly do anything. As he plays into what he sees as a running joke, though, he begins to entertain it as a legitimate possibility. In this way, readers see just how much influence Finny has over Gene, most likely because he feels guilty about what happened in the tree.



In the following months, Gene helps Finny with his schoolwork while Finny trains him to become a better runner. To do this, they get up early and Finny makes Gene run a large loop outside despite the cold. Gene mostly hates this, but one day he has a breakthrough and finds it easy to push himself. Finny congratulates him on this progress, but Gene notes that he looks somehow older and smaller as he talks to him, though he also wonders if this isn't perhaps because he himself feels suddenly bigger.

Although Finny is training Gene and thereby letting him feel like he has become part of him, there's no changing the fact that—because of his injury—Finny is no longer able to do the things that he's teaching Gene to do. When he improves his athleticism, then, Gene realizes that he is developing beyond Finny, suddenly feeling as if they're no longer all that even with one another. In this sense, a slight sense of competition is still alive in their relationship, though Gene no longer harbors any bitterness about Finny because he isn't threatened by him—rather, he feels like he is him, though Finny might not necessarily feel the same.



On their way back to the dorms after a successful morning of training, Mr. Ludsbury stops Gene and Finny and asks them what they're doing. When Finny tells him that he's training Gene for the 1944 Olympics, Mr. Ludsbury reminds them that all athletic training should be intended as preparation for the war. "No," Finny replies. This startles Mr. Ludsbury, who walks away while muttering to himself. As he leaves, Finny says that Mr. Ludsbury must be too thin to be let in on the war conspiracy, which is run by fat old men. Thinking about this, Gene pities Mr. Ludsbury for being so skinny, though he also realizes that the man has always been rather gullible.

This is an important moment because it signals Gene's newfound acceptance of Finny's conspiracy theory. Rather than finding Finny's statement about Mr. Ludsbury ridiculous, Gene feels bad that Mr. Ludsbury hasn't been let in on the fact that the war isn't real. In turn, it becomes clear that he has talked himself into believing Finny's theory, even if he knows better. Once again, then, readers see how devoted he is to Finny and how much their relationship influences the way he views the world.



CHAPTER 9

Gene gradually accepts Finny's "vision of peace." This is largely because he himself feels happy and has trouble imagining the destruction that supposedly exists beyond the confines of his own experience. In January, though, Leper Lepellier enlists in the military after watching a video that a recruiter from the United States ski troops plays in one of his classes. The video shows soldiers swishing down slopes covered in a beautiful blanket of white. This resonates deeply with Leper, who is about to turn 18 and will likely be drafted. Instead of waiting for this to happen and having no control over what branch of the military he's in, he decides to join the ski troops. And though this shocks everyone, his enlistment only makes the war feel even less real for Gene, since he can't imagine Leper as a soldier.

Previously, Leper represented the ignorant bliss of adolescence, since Gene saw him as an embodiment of the innocence of the previous summer. After all, Leper didn't even volunteer to help shovel the railways when the war caused a shortage of railroad workers. Now, though, Leper has plunged into the adult world of the war, not only acknowledging its influence, but actively joining the war effort. However, Gene has reverted back to a "vision of peace," one that Finny has helped him recapture. In keeping with this, even Leper's recruitment does nothing to make the war feel more immediate, and he manages to frame Leper's enlistment as yet another indication that the war is absurd and unreal.



Within a week, Leper is gone. He is the first boy to enlist, despite the boisterous claims that people like Brinker have made in the past about joining the military. After he leaves, Brinker and the other boys joke about his participation in the war, claiming that he's behind every allied victory. In the Butt Room, they kid about these developments, but Finny never takes part, instead slowly pulling Gene away from the others in order to spend time training for the Olympics.

One bleak winter Saturday, Finny declares that the boys should hold "**The Devon** Winter Carnival." With Gene, he assembles a crew of collaborators, including Brinker and his mild-mannered roommate, Brownie Perkins. Brinker steals hard cider from some underclassmen and tells Brownie to guard them with his life while the rest of the boys set up the games. Throughout the morning, the group surreptitiously brings various furniture and prizes from the school buildings to a nearby park. Brinker is especially devoted to helping because he sees that this event is against the rules—ever since failing to enlist, Brinker has quit the multiple committees he used to serve on, dismantling his image as a respectable and well-rounded student and taking on a new persona as an apathetic, cynical young man.

As the boys set up the carnival, Finny surveys the proceedings. Chet Douglass walks around with a trumpet while another group of boys builds a ski jump. Meanwhile, the prizes are laid out on tables, and Finny sets to work appraising them. When Brinker asks what should happen next, Finny looks at him for a moment and then declares that everyone should tackle him. Immediately, the boys jump to action. Chet plays a triumphant line on his trumpet, and everyone starts fighting while yanking open the bottles of hard cider. When everything settles down for a moment, Finny burns one of the prizes—a copy of *The Iliad*—and pronounces that the games have officially begun.

For the rest of the afternoon, everyone acts wildly. Chet stomps around playing his trumpet, everyone drinks cider, and Finny dances atop one of the tables, twisting out what Gene refers to as his own "choreography of peace." In all, the carnival is a tremendous success, and Gene describes it as their "momentary, illusory, special, and separate peace." Before the day's out, though, Brownie Perkins—who retreated to the dorms after guarding the cider—comes rushing back holding a telegram for Gene. Finny takes it first and opens it. About to read it aloud, his face falls. He hands it to Gene, who sees that it's from Leper, who has escaped from the military and needs Gene's help. The telegram instructs Gene to meet him immediately at what he calls the "Christmas location." His life, he says, depends on Gene.

Although Finny and Gene have insulated themselves from the war more than everyone else, even their fellow students apparently view the conflict as a mere abstraction, turning Leper's enlistment into a joke rather than seeing it as a sign that the war will soon claim nearly everyone they know. Despite this attitude, though, Finny still goes out of his way to distract himself and Gene, focusing on training Gene for the Olympics as a way of ignoring the influence of the outside world.



Finny and Gene aren't the only ones who have changed in recent months. Brinker has also undergone a transformation that is apparently directly connected to the war. Once a model student, he has refigured himself into the kind of person who would put off joining the military, which is exactly what he has done, as evidenced by the fact that he has yet to enlist even though he was so eager to do so the day that he and the other students shoveled the railways. By calling attention to Brinker's conversion, Knowles illustrates the profound effect that the war has on all of these young men, not just Finny and Gene.



*The carnival is yet another way for Finny to distract himself—and this time his peers, too—from the encroaching influence of the war. Rather than focusing on the harsh realities of the outside world, he has raucous fun with his friends, seizing the last vestiges of innocence that still exist within the walls of Devon. That he burns a copy of *The Iliad* is especially noteworthy, since the epic poem is about the Trojan War, therefore representing the violence and brutality that Finny is so eager to ignore.*



Although Gene feels as if the winter carnival gives him and his friends the gift of an unadulterated, insulated kind of "peace," they can't fully protect themselves from the outside world. This is made evident when Leper's disconcerting telegram reaches the boys, reporting foreboding news about his involvement in the war—the very war from which Finny has tried to distract everyone with these innocent, childish antics. And though such activities can certainly make people like Finny and Gene feel as if everything is beautiful and fun, the truth is that it's impossible for them to keep reality at bay.



CHAPTER 10

The “Christmas location” is Leper’s home in Vermont, to which Gene takes a train that very night. In retrospect, he sees this late-night train trip as the first of many that he ultimately ended up taking across the country that year, shuttling to and from various military bases once he finally enlisted. This kind of travel, he notes, comprised the entirety of his military service during World War II. This is because America’s enemies were already retreating by the time he finally entered the war. The young men just a year older than him were the last ones, he now recognizes, to see true action.

Gene hopes that Leper’s use of the word “escape” doesn’t mean that he deserted the military. Hurling toward Vermont, he convinces himself that Leper has perhaps escaped not from the military, but from foreign spies who have made their way into the United States. When he arrives, though, he quickly learns that Leper did indeed desert in order to avoid facing a Section Eight discharge, which the military gives to people who have become mentally unstable. Sitting in Leper’s dining room, he listens to his friend speak in an unhinged manner, having trouble reconciling this version of Leper with the boy he knew before. Testy and fragile, Leper tells him that he fled because he didn’t want an official Section Eight discharge, which would make it hard for him to get a job after the war.

As Leper tells Gene what happened, he senses that Gene thinks he’s a “psycho.” This word deeply troubles Gene, making him uncomfortable because of its serious, clinical sound. Suddenly, he can’t bear to sit in Leper’s dining room and listen to him speak. Moreover, he begins to worry about himself—after all, the military is what made Leper a “psycho,” and Gene must face the imminent possibility of getting drafted. With this in mind, he tells Leper to stop talking to him about his experience, but Leper only suggests that there’s nothing Gene can do to avoid the military. This enrages Gene, but Leper only laughs, insulting him by saying that there has always been something ugly lurking at his core. This, Leper says, is why Gene caused Finny’s **fall**.

At the beginning of this chapter, Gene jumps ahead in time to retrospectively situate his trip to Leper’s house. This experience, he says, is what stands out in his memory as the beginning of his involvement in the war. Although his military career was rather removed from any actual fighting, he reveals in this moment that his resolve to ignore the war (like Finny) eventually broke down. In turn, Knowles confirms that it is indeed impossible for Gene and his peers to keep the harsh realities of the outside world from encroaching on their lives.



The fact that Gene hopes Leper escaped from spies who have invaded the United States suggests that he has yet to fully grasp how serious the war really is. If he truly understood the gravity of this conflict, he wouldn’t hope that spies had snuck into the country, which would be an incredibly serious development. As it stands, though, he’s more focused on how the war influences his friends than how it impacts the country at large. In turn, he doesn’t want Leper to have run from the military because he knows that this would mean that Leper is in quite a bit of trouble. Furthermore, it would also suggest that the military itself is terrible—a scary thought, considering that Gene himself is most likely destined to join at some point.



It’s clear that Leper is unwell, but this doesn’t change the fact that he has put his finger on something that Gene wants desperately to deny: that there’s a bitterness within him that causes him to act selfishly, a bitterness that caused Finny’s fall. In essence, Leper doesn’t allow Gene to simply ignore the things that make him uncomfortable—he forces him to acknowledge that he too will likely experience the trials and tribulations of military life, and he also forces him to recognize the very shortcomings that he has spent the entire year trying to put out of his mind.



Outraged, Gene jumps up, but Leper only laughs hysterically. He reminds Gene that he ruined Finny's life, and Gene can't stop himself from kicking Leper's chair, sending him falling to the ground. Quickly, Leper's mother enters and admonishes Gene for acting spitefully toward her sick child. Gene apologizes profusely and turns to leave, but Leper insists that he stay for lunch. After eating, the two boys go for a walk, and Gene tells Leper that Brinker has changed a great deal, becoming much less cruel. Leper responds that Brinker will always be a "bastard," even if he turns into Snow White. Having said this, he bursts into tears, sobbing because the image of Snow White's head on the body of a man troubles him. He then explains that these kinds of hallucinations 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. Unable to bear it any longer, Gene tells Leper to be quiet, insisting that this story has nothing to do with him and that he doesn't care. Saying this, he runs away, leaving Leper as he blurts his story out in the snow-covered fields. As he rushes back to the train, Gene thinks about how he never wants to hear such a story ever again.

CHAPTER 11

Gene wants more than anything to see Finny when he gets back to school, so he goes looking for him, eventually finding him at the far reaches of campus engaged in a large snowball fight. Before the fight ends, everyone turns on Finny and pelts him—something Gene can see that he loves. Later, Gene asks if it's such a good idea for Finny to be playing like this on his bad leg, but Finny assures him that the leg will soon heal and be twice as strong as it was before, though he mentions that Dr. Stanpole emphasized the importance not **falling** again. Still, he says he's quite careful.

After dinner, Brinker visits Gene and Finny's room and asks about Leper. Gene is vague, not wanting to talk about what happened to his friend, but Brinker soon intuits that Leper has become unstable. He guesses that Leper cracked under the pressure of his military duties, and though Gene wants to deny this, he can't bring himself to lie. Eventually, he admits that Leper cries quite a bit now, and this prompts Brinker to lament the state of their class. When Gene asks what he means, Brinker hesitantly points out that Leper is a deserter and Finny is out of commission, rendering their class rather useless in terms of the war. Gene argues that this isn't true, but Finny agrees that he truly is unable to contribute anything to the military.

Once again, Gene deals with uncomfortable emotions by violently acting out against a friend. This time, he does so in order to stop Leper from forcing him to consider the fact that he—Gene—purposefully injured Finny. On another note, the fact that Leper started hallucinating when he was in the military suggests that the daily life of a soldier was simply too much for him to take. This, in turn, will undoubtedly cause Gene to consider what effect the military would have on him.



For now, Gene is able to simply block out reality by running away from Leper. However, it's clear that he won't be able to ignore the harsh realities of the outside world for very much longer. By retreating to Devon, he hopes to reenter an environment of false innocence, but the truth is that he will soon graduate and be forced to face the war, regardless of what he wants to think.



By this point in the novel, Finny has more or less become the exact person he was before his injury, though he can't play sports. Still, his constant cheerfulness helps take Gene's mind off of Leper and the war, allowing him to once more immerse himself in the sheltered world that Finny has created at Devon.



Gene is eager to refute Brinker's claim that Finny can't contribute anything to the military. This is because he doesn't want Finny to feel bad about his inability to become a soldier. Of course, he wants to protect Finny from this notion because he cares about his friend, but he also wants to dispel this idea because it makes him feel even more guilty than he already does about causing Finny's injury. Accordingly, readers see once again the extent to which the accident still informs Gene's behavior.



Gene says that it doesn't matter if Finny can't join the military because there's no war anyway. Although Finny smiles, Gene detects that he doesn't really believe his own conspiracy theory. And just like that, the war seems unbearably real and menacing, as all of Gene and Finny's dreams of the Olympics simply fade to nothing.

Finally, even Finny finds it difficult to ignore the reality of the war. Moreover, he most likely senses that Gene is pandering to him by insisting that the war doesn't even exist—after all, Gene was highly skeptical of this idea when Finny first suggested it, but now he is desperate to support the theory because he doesn't want Finny to feel bad about himself. This, however, only makes the war seem even more real, since Finny can see that it is somehow still affecting his life even though he can't even participate in it.



As time passes, most of the boys at Devon enlist, though those who join only flock to specialized branches of the military that are elite and safe. Nobody is eager, Gene notes, to join the frontlines. This, at least, is his attitude. He decides to wait to enlist, thinking that it will be a long war and that there's no use rushing into it. At the same time, though, he doesn't quite know why he's putting off enlisting. Brinker, for his part, hatches multiple plans to join various branches of the military, each one further and further away from any actual violent action. And yet, he too puts off enlisting.

As the war becomes more and more real, the students at Devon begrudgingly acknowledge it. They used to boast about joining the military, but this was when the entire conflict felt abstract. Now that it feels unavoidably real, the boys shy away from actually following through with their claims. No longer do they brag about becoming heroes, but instead they try to determine which branch of the military will allow them to avoid true combat. In other words, as they mature, they realize just how serious and life-threatening the war really is, and they adjust accordingly.



One morning, Brinker approaches Gene and steers him into a private room, where he accuses him of putting off enlistment because of Finny. Everyone knows, he says, that Gene won't enlist because he "pities" Finny. When Gene objects, Brinker forges onward, saying that they should all be better about forcing Finny to come to terms with his injury. They should even tease him sometimes, he says. Otherwise, Finny won't be able to accept the reality of his circumstances. Gene argues against this, but Brinker cuts him off, pointing out that Gene is perhaps too personally invested in this and saying that it would be *good* for Gene if everyone moved on from thinking about the accident. When Gene asks what he means by this, Brinker provocatively says that he doesn't know, though he suggests that Gene might know exactly what he's talking about.

In this exchange, Brinker reveals that he hasn't dropped his suspicions regarding Gene's involvement in Finny's accident. He also correctly identifies the fact that Gene is ultra-attentive to Finny's needs because of the injury, suggesting that this is ultimately holding both boys back. According to this viewpoint, Gene's pity for Finny shelters Finny from facing the reality of his situation. Similarly, Gene's focus on Finny is keeping Gene himself from moving on with his life. And though Gene vehemently denies these allegations, it's rather obvious that Brinker is correct.



Gene heads back to the dorm in a fit of worry, concerned about what Brinker might do or say. As he goes up the stairs, he encounters Finny, who has blocked a group of boys from ascending until they sing a choral song for him. Back in their room, Gene sits down to do Finny's Latin homework, telling him about what's happening in the book they're supposed to read. As they talk, Gene makes a joke about Julius Caesar not actually existing. Along with his other theories, this is something that Finny frequently talks about, finding it hard to believe that such a man was real. However, Finny doesn't laugh at his joke. Instead, he says that, though he doesn't necessarily believe teachers or books, he *does* believe Gene, since he's his best friend. And this is why, he says, he believes what Gene said about Leper becoming unstable.

Finny continues to talk about Leper, saying that he now understands once and for all that the war is real. If a war can have such an effect on somebody like Leper, he says, then it must be real. He also adds that he has always known that it was real but that he didn't feel like admitting it. Going on, he admits that he wasn't sure what to think when Gene told his story about Leper, but then he saw Leper himself earlier that very morning. He was, Finny tells Gene, hiding in the bushes near the chapel. When Finny approached, he ran into a teacher's office. Gene and Finny start laughing in spite of themselves, but then they decide not to tell anyone that Leper is on campus. Returning to the topic of the war, Gene notes that he wishes Finny had never decided that it was real.

Late that night, Brinker and three others burst into Gene and Finny's room. Not saying where they're going, they lead them to the Assembly Room, which is a large auditorium in the First Building. Gathered in this room are a number of other students, all of whom are dressed in graduation gowns. Gene thinks that Brinker is organizing some kind of senior prank, but then Brinker addresses the assembled crowd, calling their attention to Finny's limp. They have come here tonight, he says, to investigate the events that led to Finny's injury. In an officious voice, he acts like a judge, questioning Finny about what happened. As Finny confusedly answers the questions, Gene notes that his voice sounds uncharacteristically strained.

Once again, Gene tries to play into Finny's skepticism, hoping to fortify the blissful world of peace and ignorance that they have cultivated together. However, Finny appears unwilling to put the effort into this task, instead emphasizing that the only person he truly trusts is Gene. Upon hearing this, it becomes that much harder for Gene to wrap his head around ever telling Finny the truth about what happened in the tree, forcing him to hide his guilt and continue acting like Finny's fall was an accident.



Finny has already come to terms with the fact that the war is real, but this is the first time that he verbally admits it. In doing so, he puts an official end to his and Gene's sheltered world, effectively obliterating the "separate peace" that they've managed to create in otherwise turbulent times. Having observed the devastating effect of the war on Leper, both boys find themselves incapable of denying the conflict's unrelenting influence, finally deciding to face reality for what it is.



Brinker's jokes about the role Gene played in Finny's injury reach their zenith in this scene, as this staged event proves that he doesn't actually see the matter as much of a joke. Of course, it's possible that he still thinks this is in good fun, but it seems more likely that he legitimately wants to know whether or not Gene caused Finny's fall. Revealing the truth, he thinks, will be good for both boys. And yet, this odd ceremony has not yet revealed itself to be anything more than a humorous charade, which is why it's interesting that Finny's voice sounds tense—a sign that he's actively working to continue denying the truth, which is that Gene caused his injury. In this moment, then, readers see how desperate Finny is—either consciously or, more likely, subconsciously—to preserve his best friend's innocence.



Gene interjects, but Brinker pushes on, saying that it will be good to get everything “out into the open” so that nobody is suspicious about what happened. This unnerves Finny, who asks Gene what’s going on. Still, Brinker forges onward, continuing to ask Finny questions. In response, Finny says that he simply lost his balance and fell. Hearing this, though, Brinker asks if Finny has ever considered that this isn’t really what happened. Gene can tell that this question strikes something that Finny has been considering in the back of his mind for quite some time. He admits that he sometimes feels as if **the tree** shook him out of it itself, but then Brinker points out that there was another person in the tree—a fact that Finny disputes.

Some of the other boys jump in at this point, pointing out that Gene was also in **the tree**. As he scrambles to answer, though, Finny says that Gene was at the *bottom* of the tree, and Gene immediately agrees. This creates confusion, as some people say that Gene was in the tree while Gene insists that he was at the bottom. Finny, for his part, begins to get things mixed up, saying that he can’t remember where, exactly, Gene was. This strikes Brinker as unlikely, since he once saw a childhood friend get hit by a car and remembers every single detail about the event.

Amidst the confusion, Finny suddenly insists that he remembers what happened. He says that he was in **the tree** and remembers seeing Gene standing on the bank. He recalls Gene making fun of him for showing off and posing—the kind of remark that best friends make to each other. Then, he says, he remembers suggesting that he and Gene should jump at the same time, because he thought it’d be fun to do it together. Suddenly, though, he stops speaking. He looks like somebody has hit him hard in the face. After a moment, he says that all of this happened on the ground, and that both of them began to climb the tree after he suggested that they jump at the same time. Having said this, he trails off once more.

During Brinker and Finny’s exchange, it becomes clear that Finny has blocked out the memory of what happened in order to deny that Gene caused his fall. Gene recognizes this as soon as Brinker asks Finny if he’s ever thought that he might not have simply lost his balance. As Finny’s face reacts to this notion, Gene understands that his best friend has subconsciously repressed his doubts, though this doesn’t mean he hasn’t entertained certain ideas about what really happened. This makes sense, since Finny alluded to such ideas when he and Gene first spoke after the accident. What’s more, Gene also admitted to the truth to him when he visited him at home. And yet, Finny has managed to put such thoughts out of his mind, demonstrating how important it is to him to see Gene as his kind and loving friend.



As the other students begin to indirectly accuse Gene of causing Finny’s fall, Finny himself reverts back to denial, actively working to clear Gene’s name. Once again, then, readers see how eager he is to believe that Gene would never do anything to hurt him.



Until this point, it has seemed possible that Finny actively wanted to trick himself into believing that Gene had nothing to do with his fall. Now, though, it emerges that Finny has been subconsciously misleading himself, legitimately misremembering the chain of events that led to his fall. And though he does most likely want to protect Gene from scrutiny, he finds himself unnerved by his own realization that things didn’t play out like he thought they did.



Brinker asks who else was present when Finny fell, and somebody says that Leper was there. Brinker remarks that Leper would know exactly what happened because he was always so detail-oriented, but this is unhelpful because he isn't around to address this makeshift court. After a moment, though, Finny quietly informs Brinker that Leper is at **Devon**, and several boys immediately rush off to get him. When Leper arrives, Brinker asks him to describe what he saw the day of Finny's **fall**, and Leper states that, though the sun was in his eyes, he knows for a fact that there were two people in **the tree**. One was holding onto the trunk, and the other had walked out on the limb. He says the accident happened like a piston engine—first the figure by the trunk pushed down, and then the figure at the other end rose and fell.

Brinker asks Leper to identify if the person who fell was Finny, but Leper refuses to do so, not wanting to get too involved. When Brinker continues to pressure him, he lashes out, calling Brinker a “bastard” and saying that he's no longer willing to be everyone's “fool.” Meanwhile, Finny gets up and says that he doesn't care anymore. As he moves to the door, Brinker calls out to him, saying that they haven't collected all the necessary facts, but Finny screams at him, saying that he can go ahead and gather all the facts he wants. He then rushes into the hallway, and several moments later, everyone hears a disastrous sound as he falls down the marble stairs.

CHAPTER 12

The boys act immediately when they hear Finny fall down the stairs. While Brinker makes sure that nobody moves Finny's body, other boys run to get Dr. Stanpole and Mr. Latham, the wrestling coach who knows first aid. At one point, Brinker tells Gene to get a blanket for Finny. When he comes back, he gives the blanket to Mr. Latham and watches him wrap it around Finny, wishing all the while that he could be the person to do this. However, he knows that this might make Finny even angrier at him.

When Dr. Stanpole arrives, he carefully places Finny in a chair and assembles a group to carry him away. As Finny goes, Gene watches his serene face, sensing that he isn't used to needing help from others. Just before Dr. Stanpole follows the group out of the building, he tells Gene that Finny has broken his leg again. This time, though, the break isn't quite as messy.

Leper's account is void of any unstable rants or crying jags that previously characterized him as unstable when Gene visited him in Vermont. As a result, what he says appears to be the objective truth, ultimately casting Gene as guilty. More importantly, Finny has dropped his various mechanisms of denial, meaning that he is unlikely to react favorably to this news.



Gene has already mentioned that this tribunal takes place in the First Building. This is worth noting, since Gene revisits the First Building as an adult and looks at a marble staircase, thinking about how small it looks compared to how he remembered it. This very moment, when Finny tumbles down the steps, is the reason that Gene remembers the staircase as so terrible and large. After all, it is responsible for Finny's second fall.



All Gene wants is to be close to his friend, who means the world to him. He deeply regrets what he did that fateful summer evening in the tree, but has no way of taking it back. Instead, he's forced into the role of a tragic spectator as Finny's life continues its downward spiral—a spiral that can be traced directly back to Gene himself.



Gene admires Finny's stoicism, noting that his best friend is unused to relying so heavily on other people. Normally a self-sufficient person, he now must depend upon others, a change that only emphasizes the extent to which Gene's actions have changed his life.



Gene doesn't want to go back to his empty dorm room. Instead, he sneaks into the infirmary and crouches beneath the window, hearing Dr. Stanpole and the nurse work on Finny. At one point, he thinks of how Mr. Latham always tells people to give things "the old college try," and he imagines him saying this to Finny as Dr. Stanpole attends to him. This makes Gene laugh wildly, and he worries that they'll hear him. However, his laughter later turns to tears. Sobbing, he hears Dr. Stanpole's car drive away, so he stands up and tries to enter Finny's room through the window. Immediately, Finny asks who's there, and when Gene tries to explain why he's come, Finny accuses him of wanting to give him yet another broken bone. He then flails his arms, his torso falling off the bed.

Throughout the novel, Finny has denied the fact that Gene intentionally injured him. Now, though, he lashes out at his best friend, suddenly distrustful and appalled that Gene would ever have wanted him to fall from the tree. Finally, then, Gene must face the scorn he has deserved all along.



Gene watches as Finny lifts his torso back onto the bed. Gene then slips out the window again, walking through the New Hampshire dark. As he walks around campus, he feels as if **Devon** exists separately from him, as if he himself is part of a dream and doesn't truly belong to his surroundings. When he awakens the following morning, he is underneath a ramp that leads to the Devon stadium's door. Returning to his room, he finds a note from Dr. Stanpole asking him to bring Finny's clothing to the infirmary, so he prepares a suitcase for his friend and sets off. On his way, he tries to make himself feel better by thinking of the war, contemplating the fact that a broken leg, in the grand scheme of things, is a minor travesty compared to the atrocities of battle.

Whereas Gene once felt as if Devon's environment afforded him a certain kind of "separate peace" from the rest of the world, he now feels unable to re-enter this mindset. Accordingly, Devon itself suddenly seems foreign to him, as if he can't fully exist within it now that he has lost his innocence. Accordingly, his thoughts turn to the war, helping him place Finny's injuries into the greater context of the outside world, though it's doubtful that this makes him feel any less guilty for harming his friend.



At the infirmary, Finny tells Gene where to put the suitcase. His tone is matter-of-fact, but Gene notices that his hands are shaking as he inspects the contents of the suitcase. Seeing this, Gene says that he tried to tell Finny the truth when he visited him at home, and Finny assures him that he remembers. He then asks why Gene came to the infirmary the previous night, and Gene admits that he doesn't know, other than that he had the overwhelming sense that he "belonged" in the ward with Finny. For a long time, the two boys simply look at each other. Finny's expression suggests that he knows exactly what Gene means but doesn't want to say so. Instead, he blurts out that he wishes there wasn't a war happening because he won't be able to contribute.

Gene felt as if he "belonged" in the infirmary because he has spent the entire academic year trying to embody Finny's identity. Together, they have worked to intertwine their lives. What's more, Gene sees himself as the reason that Finny is in the infirmary, thereby adding to his sense that he should be lying in bed with a broken leg. When he says this, Finny sees that Gene still cares about him, despite the fact that he purposefully caused his fall. And though he hasn't said it yet, it's obvious that he is going to forgive Gene, since he seems to understand what his friend is saying.



Finny tells Gene that he has been writing to various military branches all year, desperately trying to find a way to join World War II. Everyone he wrote to, though, refused to take him because of his leg. This is why he has spent so much time trying to deny the existence of the war, hoping that this would help him put the matter out of his mind. To make him feel better, Gene tells Finny that he wouldn't be any good in a war anyway, since he'd make friends with the other side, teach them English, and start a baseball game. As he says this, Finny begins to smile despite himself, though this turns to tears. He then asks if it was just a "blind impulse" that led Gene to bounce him out of **the tree**, and Gene assures him that it was, hoping that he'll believe him.

Finny tells Gene that he does believe him when he says there was nothing personal about what he did in **the tree**. What matters most to Finny, he admits, is that Gene didn't feel a sense of hate toward him. Again, Gene assures him that this isn't what led him to bounce the limb, though he doesn't know how to show him this. Crying, Finny says that he already believes him.

After Gene and Finny make up, Dr. Stanpole tells Gene to come back to the infirmary around 5 that evening. By then he will have re-set the bone in Finny's leg, and Finny will just be waking up from the anesthesia. For the rest of the day, Gene goes to class and focuses on his studies, eagerly watching the clock. When evening approaches, he makes his way back to the infirmary and sits on a bench in the hall. After he's been waiting for quite some time, Dr. Stanpole emerges with his head down and his hands in his pockets. He then tells Gene that boys his age are going to have to face bad news quite a lot, so he will have to get used to what he's about to hear. "Your friend is dead," he says.

Dr. Stanpole says that setting Finny's bone should have been a simple procedure and, for that reason, he saw no need to send him to a real hospital. However, a small amount of Finny's bone marrow must have leaked into his bloodstream, because his heart stopped without warning. Losing himself to emotion, Dr. Stanpole says that the operating room always presents certain risks, just like war. He then laments the fact that such things have to happen to young boys like Gene and Finny. Having heard this news, Gene does not cry, nor does he cry at Finny's funeral, since he feels as if he's attending his own funeral, and one does not cry at such a time.

In this scene, Finny finally admits that his theory about the war has been nothing but a distraction, something to help take his mind off the fact that he can't become a soldier. More importantly, though, he shows his capacity for forgiveness, demonstrating that what he cares about most is that Gene didn't want to do him wrong. Of course, Gene says that he never meant anything by his impulsive actions, and while this might be true, readers also know that Gene struggled with envy and resentment in the days leading up to the fall. Consequently, it's difficult to say whether or not Gene is actually telling the truth when he says that his actions weren't personal. Nonetheless, it's clear that he deeply regrets what he did.



Again, Finny demonstrates his capacity to prioritize friendship over all else, proving that his relationship with Gene means more to him than anything. The tragedy, of course, is that this hasn't always been the case for Gene, who allowed his jealousy and false sense of rivalry to hurt the one person who cares so much for him.



The shock of Finny's death is somewhat softened by the knowledge that Gene returns to Devon as an adult and stares sadly at the stairs and the tree, hinting at the fact that he can't visit Finny himself. Still, this news is devastating, especially since Finny and Gene have finally addressed the only thing threatening their relationship. Having cleared the air, the two boys set themselves up to continue their beautiful connection—and then Finny is yanked away.



Again, Knowles allows Gene and Finny's identities to merge, as Gene can't bring himself to cry for Finny because doing so would feel like crying for himself. After all, this is what he has lost: a part of himself. That he will have to face similar realities in the future (because of the war and, of course, the general nature of mortality) does nothing to make this loss any easier, but Gene doesn't show his emotions, perhaps knowing that no amount of crying will bring Finny back. In other words, he recognizes the harsh reality of what has just happened instead of denying it like he and Finny often denied other unfortunate circumstances.



CHAPTER 13

Gene and his classmates graduate, and **Devon** lets the military use part of the campus for the summer. All of the students have yet to vacate the dorms, so Gene watches as the soldiers and military equipment arrive. Above all, he's surprised by how unimpressive the soldiers look, thinking that they seem not much older than him. As he watches, he senses that peace hangs over Devon like it did the summer before, and this starkly contrasts the military's presence.

Brinker invites Gene to the Butt Room to meet his father. When he meets him, Gene tells Brinker's father that he enlisted in the Navy because he thinks it's the safest option, since he'll likely never have to go to the frontlines. This displeases Brinker's father, who is already upset that Brinker has joined the Coast Guard for the same reasons. With this in mind, he lectures Gene and Brinker about the honor of military service, telling them that they'll regret it for the rest of their lives if they don't have good war stories to tell. When his father leaves, Brinker apologizes to Gene and denounces the old man's generation for starting a war and making their children fight it. Inwardly, though, Gene disagrees with this assessment, believing that wars begin not because of generational stupidity, but because of "something ignorant in the human heart."

Gene goes to the gym to empty his locker. Inside the locker room, he encounters a group of soldiers who will be training at **Devon** for the summer. Gene watches them and thinks about how skinny they look. He notes that he never talks about Finny anymore but always feels as if he's somehow in his presence. The time that he spent with Finny, he knows, was so formative that he continues to live in the "atmosphere" that Finny created. In this sense, he thinks about how he'll never be able to leave behind Finny's perspective, which was messy and unique and vibrantly alive.

It's strange that Gene feels as if peace has once more descended on Devon, since his previous conception of peace was so wrapped up in his relationship with Finny. This is perhaps a sign that, although Finny himself has died, his death has helped Gene see that the best parts of his friend have actually become the best parts of himself. In turn, his ability to access a sense of peace and serenity exists within himself, and he can tap into this feeling whenever he wants, despite his circumstances. Simply put, he carries with him the simplistic beauty with which Finny lived his life, and this helps him cope with the ugliness all around him.



Gene's experience with Finny has taught him that the kind of bitter, rivalrous attitude that is inherent to war (the same attitude that caused him to injure his best friend) only leads to sadness and destruction. For this reason, he disapproves of war and recognizes that such animosity only springs from an unfortunate form of contempt that divides people from one another. In keeping with this, he has resigned himself to entering a part of the military that will put him in the least amount of danger, since he doesn't actually believe in such causes and therefore doesn't want to risk his life.



The previous summer, Gene and Finny coveted the idea of joining the military, clearly seeing soldiers as awe-inspiring heroes. Now, though, Gene notices how skinny and fragile these men look, ultimately seeing them as fallible and—in viewing them like this—recognizing how delicate human life truly is. This, in turn, makes him think of Finny, whose death he doesn't like to talk about. This is partly because he doesn't feel as if Finny ever really left him, since his influence still seems so present in his everyday life. In turn, readers see just how profoundly his and Finny's relationship has impacted his entire life and worldview.



Gene's peers have all begun to understand the reality of the war. Finny, though, was capable of avoiding the crushing misery that war brings, and Gene knows that nothing would have been able to destroy his "harmonious and natural unity"—nothing, that is, except Gene. Looking at the soldiers in the locker room, Gene knows that he will be living like them in just a few short weeks, when he'll finally become part of the military. However, this doesn't bother him because he feels ready for the war now that all of his hatred has disappeared. Any angst he may have felt in his past faded away when Finny died, as if Finny himself soaked it up and took it with him.

Outside again, Gene hears marching instructions from afar and can't help but let his feet fall into the militaristic rhythm. Throughout the war, Gene never kills anyone and never cultivates a sense of hatred toward the enemy. This, he knows, is because *his* war ended long before he joined the military. Indeed, he feels as if he has already killed his enemy. He also recognizes that Finny is the only person he ever met who never hated anyone. Other people develop various enmities and construct barriers between themselves and the world, but this only hurts them in the end. Unlike Phineas, everyone else falls prey to war, developing a sense of self-protection that hardly protects them from their enemies and ultimately obscures them from recognizing whether or not the people they're fighting are actually their enemies after all.

Gene strives to embody Finny's "harmonious and natural unity," or his ability to accept difficult things without letting them overshadow the joyous parts of his life. Although Finny's conspiracy theory about the war was a form of denial, it ultimately helped him focus on the beautiful parts of his existence, paying attention only to the things that brought him happiness. This, it seems, is exactly what Gene intends to do as he moves forward, accepting the reality of war without destroying his entire life or capacity to experience happiness. This is something that Finny taught him by way of example, and it is something he'll never forget.



When Gene considers the fact that he has already killed his enemy, it would be easy to assume that he's referring to Finny. However, it's more likely that he is referring to the part of his identity that caused him to be resentful, envious, and violent toward his best friend. Having seen what this kind of behavior leads to, he has banished all forms of rivalry and self-interest from his soul, understanding that building walls between himself and others will do nothing but isolate him from the world and force him into confinement with his only true enemy: himself.





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