

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

A Separate Peace

by John Knowles

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ISBN 978-1-60389-361-9

Item No. 303308

A Separate Peace

Objectives

By the end of this unit, the student will be able to:

1. trace the development of various themes of the novel—
 - coming-of-age and loss-of-innocence
 - identity and self-realization
 - the ubiquity of human cruelty
 - conformity and non-conformity; tradition and change.
2. analyze the structure of the novel and explain the impact of structure on plot and theme.
3. explain how the first-person narrative affects the perspective from which the reader understands the novel.
4. evaluate the characters of Phineas and Gene as foils.
5. trace the development of Gene as a dynamic character.
6. analyze the impact of Gene as an unreliable first-person narrator.
7. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
8. respond to free-response questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
9. offer a close reading of *A Separate Peace* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

A Separate Peace

Introductory Lecture

The Coming-of-Age Novel:

A Separate Peace is John Knowles' first published novel, released in 1959. This coming-of-age novel, or *bildungsroman*, is Knowles's best-known and most widely-read work.

A **bildungsroman**, also sometimes called a “*novel of formation*” is a specific type of coming-of-age novel that presents the psychological, moral and social maturation of the protagonist.

The following are common elements of the *bildungsroman*:

- The protagonist embarks on a journey—whether literal or metaphoric—which prompts his or her growth from child to adult.
- The protagonist must have a reason to embark upon this journey—a loss or feeling of discontent.
- The process of maturation is long and difficult. The protagonist experiences repeated clashes between his or her needs and desires and the stringent values of an unbending social order.
- Eventually, as the protagonist matures socially, emotionally, and psychologically, he or she is assimilated into the society. The novel ends with the protagonist's new assessment of him or herself and his or her new place in that society.

A Separate Peace is Gene's *bildungsroman*. Returning as an adult to the locale of his coming-of-age, Gene narrates the events of the summer of 1942 and the following school year, the period during which he faced and overcame the dark forces of his own psyche.

Gene's journey is a metaphoric one that symbolically takes place while he is away from home at a boarding school. While the reader knows that Gene has a family, we never meet them, and they are rarely mentioned. There are brief mentions of Gene's having been home, but no scenes take place there. We are not even told precisely where Gene's home is, only that it is in the South. Thus, Gene is both symbolically and geographically removed from his home and family for his coming-of-age experience.

In order for Gene to survive in the vastly different societies of the Summer and Winter Sessions, he must pit his personal desires and needs against what he perceives to be the demands of the society of Finny's friendship and then the demands of the boys who appear to threaten him with exposure of his crime. On this level, the entire book is a struggle for Gene to survive—both in the society created by Finny and in the society in which Finny is notably absent. The studious

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Chapter 1

1. What two locations—which he describes as “fearful”—does the narrator visit? How does he describe each?

2. What is suggested by the tone of the opening section of the novel?

3. What is implied when the narrator considers “how far [his] convalescence had gone”?

4. Consider the narrator’s reflection that, “Nothing endures, not a tree, not love, not even a death by violence.” What do all of the clues provided so far most likely suggest?

5. How do the weather and the time of year emphasize the mood of the opening section?

6. How is World War II introduced as a factor in the novel?

Chapter 5

1. Why does Gene put on Finny's pink shirt?

2. Why does Knowles leave the issue of Gene's intent in causing the fall ambiguous?

3. What revelation does Gene have in the hospital room?

4. What is the significance of Gene's admission at the end of this chapter?

Chapter 10

1. How does Knowles maintain suspense about Leper in this chapter?

2. How is Leper changed from before he enlisted? What is Knowles most likely suggesting?

3. Given his newfound bluntness, what observation does Leper make of Gene? What does this suggest?

4. What is Gene's reaction? What does this suggest about Gene?

5. How close does Leper consider himself to be to Gene? How do you know?

6. Why does Gene react to Leper's confidence the way he does?

7. Thematically, what has happened to Leper? How are he and Gene similar?
