

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

A Separate Peace

by John Knowles

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A Separate Peace

Note to the Teacher

This novel, published in 1960, has been a popular school classic since it first appeared. Although it is set in the closing years of World War II at a private boys' school, readers can relate to the boys and their problems because the problems transcend time and place. The feelings, fears, and faults of the boys are instantly recognizable by all youths.

Note: All references come from the First Scribner edition of *A Separate Peace*, copyright 2003.

A Separate Peace

Objectives

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

1. identify the following literary elements and relate them to the novel:
 - allusion
 - first-person narration
 - flashback
 - foreshadowing
 - imagery
 - irony
 - metaphor
 - mood
 - paradox
 - personification
 - simile
 - symbolism
 - theme
2. write an essay that states the major theme in the novel as it relates to the title, supported by specific quotes and examples from the story.
3. analyze Gene's complex feelings toward Finny over the course of the novel, and explain how these feelings drive the plot.
4. discuss the impact of World War II on the Devon boys, focusing on how it influences and shapes the following characters in particular: Gene, Finny, Leper, and Brinker.
5. explain Gene's assertion that evil is "something ignorant in the human heart," and discuss how Knowles relates this idea to the war and to Gene's jouncing of the limb.
6. explain how the first-person narrative affects the perspective from which the reader understands the novel.
7. examine the issues of conformity and nonconformity, especially as they relate to Gene, Finny, and Leper.
8. compare and contrast Gene and Finny, focusing on their personalities, philosophies, moral and ethical makeup, feelings toward one another, and attitudes toward the war.

A Separate Peace

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Discuss Gene's jouncing of the limb and Finny's subsequent fall. Do you think the shaking of the limb was an intentional act, an accident, or an unconscious impulse? Cite evidence from the story to support your answer.
2. Explain the circumstances around Finny's second fall. Compare and contrast the second fall with the first. Who, if anyone, is to blame for Finny's second fall?
3. Discuss Finny's death. What causes it? How does Gene feel about it? Can Gene be held responsible for it in any way? Give reasons to support your answer.
4. Identify the following minor characters as individuals and types (flat or round): Leper, Brinker, Quackenbush, Mr. Ludsbury, Brinker's father.
5. Analyze the point of view in the novel, noting in particular that the events actually take place fifteen years before the novel opens. How does the use of flashback enhance the narrative?
6. Discuss human nature and instinct as they relate to the characters in the novel. Specifically, how does instinct play a role in Gene's actions and motivations?
7. Discuss the following events in relation to the novel's major concepts and themes:
 - the Winter Carnival
 - the mock trial
 - Finny's fall from the tree
 - Finny's fall down the stairs
 - Finny's death
 - the war
8. Some critics compare Devon in the summer of 1942 to the Garden of Eden. Discuss this analogy, explaining the symbolic significance of the tree on the riverbank as it relates to the tree in the Garden of Eden. Compare the boys to Adam and Eve, discussing the concepts of innocence and the knowledge of good and evil.
9. In what sense is *A Separate Peace* a novel about good and evil? How does Knowles seem to define evil in the novel? How does it relate to Gene's jouncing of the limb, as well as to the war? Explain whether you agree or disagree with Knowles's concept of evil.
10. Discuss *A Separate Peace* as a psychological novel. How does the action of the story stem from Gene's inner motivations? How does first-person narration help to take the reader inside Gene's mind and illuminate his private thoughts?

A Separate Peace

Chapter 1

Vocabulary

artillery – weapons, arms
capacious – large, roomy
collaborator – a partner in a plot or scheme
consternation – anxiety, fear; alarm
contentious – argumentative
convalescence – a period of healing or recovery
cordial – pleasant, friendly
cupola – a dome-like structure on the roof of a building
deigning – lowering oneself; condescending
detectable – visible; noticeable
dismal – gloomy, dreary
droll – oddly comical or amusing
enfeebled – weakened
forbidding – uninviting; grim
formidable – fearsome; impressive
genially – in a friendly way
inanimate – lifeless, unresponsive
inveigle – to tempt or coax
invincible – unable to be defeated
irate – angry, enraged
manses – large homes; mansions
matriarchal – motherly; maternal
mire – mud, muck
nondescript – plain; unremarkable
obscene – offensive, indecent
perpendicular – at a right angle to a straight line; vertical
prodigious – extraordinary; huge
radiant – bright; dazzling
ramshackle – rundown; worn
reverberant – echoing, resounding
rhetorically – without expecting an answer
salient – a piece of land that projects out from its surroundings
sedate – somber; dignified
seigneurs – feudal lords; noblemen
specters – ghosts, phantoms
stately – grand; dignified
strait-laced – prim, proper
tacit – unspoken; implied

Chapter 4

Vocabulary

aide-mémoire – [French] a memory aid; a reminder
candid – open, honest, upfront
curtly – abruptly; almost rudely
detonation – an explosion
devastation – overwhelming grief or shock; destruction, ruin
discern – to detect or notice
effulgence – extreme brilliance; splendor
enmity – deep-rooted hatred
exuberantly – joyfully, wildly
flourished – thrived, blossomed
gaunt – thin and bony; haggard
heady – exhilarating, thrilling, intoxicating
indiscriminately – without making distinctions or judgments
latent – hidden under the surface; dormant
listlessly – limply, tiredly; halfheartedly
mordantly – in a harsh or biting way
obliterated – wiped out; destroyed
paganism – characterized by a lack of morals; spiritual belief outside of accepted religions
redoubled – increased, multiplied
singularity – the quality of being unusual and remarkable; uniqueness
sustaining – supporting; upholding
treachery – betrayal, disloyalty; deceit
undulation – a wave or ripple
valedictorian – the student with the highest academic achievement

1. As the chapter opens, Gene describes the approach of dawn at the beach. What similes are used in the description? What two biblical allusions does the author employ near the end of the description?

2. After he flunks his trigonometry test, what conclusion does Gene come to regarding himself and Finny? How does the idea of hate fit into his thoughts?

7. When Gene protests to Finny that there will not be an Olympics in 1944 due to the war, Finny responds, "Leave your fantasy life out of this. We're grooming you for the Olympics, pal, in 1944." What is ironic about Finny's response?

8. Despite Gene's disbelief in the possibility of a 1944 Olympics, he agrees to establish a partnership with Finny and begin training for it. Why?

9. Gene talks about the Olympics training, saying, "There was no harm in taking aim, even if the target was a dream." Do you agree with his statement? In what ways, if any, might harm come as a result of believing in a fantasy?

10. In addition to the Olympics training, in what other ways does Gene find himself sinking into Finny's fantasy world?

Chapter 12

Vocabulary

alluded – made a passing reference; mentioned
amiss – out of place; wrong
animosity – hostility, hatred
decrepit – old, feeble; decaying
idly – casually; without specific intent
impervious – unaffected; unmoved
incomprehensible – impossible to understand; unfathomable
incongruity – an inconsistency or absurdity
indecipherable – impossible to interpret or decode
innately – essentially, fundamentally
irreconcilably – in a conflicting or opposing manner
laboriously – with great effort
languid – lazy; lacking energy or enthusiasm
maladjustments – disorders; abnormalities
penetrated – entered; broke through
personage – a public figure; a dignitary
pontiff – the pope
precariously – unsteadily; in a shaky or unstable manner
waverings – doubts, uncertainties

1. As the chapter opens, the reader learns that Finny's leg has been broken again. According to Dr. Stanpole, how is this break different from the first one? What is symbolic about the difference?

2. As Gene watches Finny being carried on a chair after the fall, he has a revelation about his and Finny's relationship. What is this revelation?
