***A Separate Peace:***

 Character Profiles

|  |
| --- |
| **Gene:** Gene is the narrator of the novel and appears at two different time periods: as a middle-aged man re-visiting Devon fifteen years after being a student there, and, for the majority of the novel, as a sixteen and seventeen-year-old student during World War II. The novel is written in the past tense, and we assume that Gene's narration is triggered by his re-visitation of his old school when he is thirty-two. And although the older narrator seems long past the emotional turmoil that marked his schoolboy days, the events of his years at Devon are told as if they were occurring in the present, as if our narrator were still sixteen years old. The Gene that we encounter for the bulk of the novel is, like many of his classmates, at a liminal stage in his life-the adolescence between boyhood and manhood. This transition is further emphasized by the war, Gene being in the final years of freedom before the ravages of a world war can legally claim him. Outwardly Gene is one of the top students in his class and a talented athlete. These traits earn him respect on campus and, most importantly, the friendship of Phineas, whom Gene respects more than any of his fellow classmates. But inwardly, Gene is plagued by the darker forces of human nature, forces which prey upon the turbulence of adolescence. Gene's admiration and love for Finny is balanced and marred by his fierce jealousy of him, by a deep insecurity in himself, and, because of his insecurity, a need to compete with and "defeat" his friend at all costs. Gene's internal emotional battles are the major source of conflict and tension in the novel.**Phineas:** Called Finny by his classmates, Phineas is Gene's closest companion at Devon and, for our narrator, the central focus of the novel. Finny is five feet eight and a half inches tall and weighs one hundred fifty pounds "which flowed from his legs to torso around shoulders to arms and full strong neck in an uninterrupted, unemphatic unity of strength" (8). Indeed, Finny is the superhuman wonder of athletics and physical harmony at Devon, far surpassing any competition from his classmates, Gene included. What is more, Finny's physical prowess matches that of his personality-he is a charismatic, good-natured, and persuasive young man. Finny finds joy outside of authority and is described by Gene as "a student who combined a calm ignorance of the rules with a winning urge to do good, who seemed to love the school truly and deeply, and never more than when he was breaking the regulations" (16). Although not as strong a student as Gene, Phineas is not consumed by jealousy and the need to compete with his friend, which exposes Gene's own insecurity. After breaking his leg, however, Finny is faced with his own personal struggle: the bitterness of being a cripple and attempting to live in a world where sports and enlistment in the army are no longer a possibility. And, of course, Phineas must also confront the fact that his life-altering injury was caused by someone he considered, and still must try to consider, to be his best friend.**Elwin "Leper" Lepellier:** Leper is the dreamy, eccentric, unathletic loner at Devon. Rather than prepare for or become involved with the war, Leper would rather collect snails or search for beaver dams. Leper's role increases in significance when, to everyone's surprise, he decides to enlist, making the war seem even more unreal for Gene. But Leper's quiet and quirky personality prove to be completely incompatible with army life, and he escapes from his training camp. The post-army Leper is no longer his calm, dreamy self, but rather an emotionally volatile, terrified young man. His involvement in the army has forced him to emerge from what Gene dubs his "protective cloud of vagueness" and he meets "the horror, face to face, just as he had always feared" (196).**Brinker Hadley:** The last character to undergo development in the novel, Brinker is introduced at the beginning of Winter Session as an industrious and organized student, a class leader and head of many student organizations. Brinker is responsible for the two interrogations into Finny's accident, once immediately following his fall from the tree and once, a more serious trial, at the end of the novel, before Finny re-breaks his leg. Although vocal about his desire to enlist, Brinker doesn't dare do so without the company of his classmates, unlike Leper. And when he finally involves himself with war activities, he is sure to keep himself as far from actual combat as possible. Over the course of the year, Brinker becomes disillusioned and less active in the school organizations. This, we learn at the novel's end, is due to a strong resentment of his father, a World War I veteran and war fanatic who pressures his son into combat.**Cliff Quackenbush:** Cliff's character is as unfortunate as his last name. A gruff senior, manager of the crew team, Cliff is a recipient of a general dislike from his classmates at Devon. Bitter about his unpopularity, Cliff adopts a cruel, arrogant manner, taking advantage of Gene's position as assistant crew manager as an opportunity to treat someone as an inferior, which fosters a dislike and a wrestling match between the two.**Chet Douglass:** Chet is a strong student who remains on the periphery of the novel's action. He is Gene's competition in the classroom and his real desire to learn and his fascination with what he studies contrasts Gene's competitive disinterest in any subject. Gene writes of him: "He got carried away by things; for example, he was so fascinated by the tilting planes of solid geometry that he did almost as badly in trigonometry as I did myself" (46). Chet is also extremely talented at tennis and trumpet playing, but, according to Gene: "he had an underlying obliging and considerate strain which barred him from being a really important member of the class" (124).**Mr. Hadley:** Brinker's father, an example of the war enthusiasm of the older generation. Disappointed by his son and Gene's desire to remain away from combat, Mr. Hadley tells the boys that they will have their war memories forever and it is best to develop memories of fighting. Brinker's father seems living proof of Finny's theory that the war is nothing but a ruse orchestrated by fat older men who are fearful of losing their power to the younger generation.**Mr. Ludsbury:** The tall, authoritative Master of Winter Session. A stern disciplinarian, Ludsbury reproaches Gene and his classmates for taking advantage of the lack of discipline during the Summer Session and  encourages Gene and Finny to direct their Olympic training toward the more practical and more urgent war effort. Gene writes that Ludsbury, faced with the dangers of the approaching war, would say: "How dare this threaten me, I am much too good for this sort of handling, I shall rise above this" (196).**Dr. Stanpole:** The school doctor who urges Gene to visit Finny in the Infirmary and help him to confront his injury. When Finny re-breaks his leg, it is Dr. Stanpole who attempts to set the bone, during which process Phineas dies. Dr. Stanpole has difficulty controlling his sorrow and shock as he informs Gene of his best friend's death. |

Metaphor Analysis

|  |
| --- |
| **The Tree:** The tree by the Devon River is the first symbol that the reader encounters, the object that draws Gene back to the school fifteen years after he was a student there. Gene's perception of the tree at these two vastly different time periods is a reflection of the change that has occurred within him. When Gene was at Devon, the tree "was tremendous, an irate, steely black steeple beside the river" (6). For the sixteen year-old Gene, the tree is fear itself, fear that he must climb and conquer, a task that is easy for Phineas even then. As an adult, the tree seems to Gene to be "weary from age, enfeebled, dry" (6). Gene writes that it is a symbol for "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" (6). Years later, the tree is not significant because of the fear it instills in our narratr, but rather because of the change it represents. Indeed, the tree has remained the same in the sense that it is still there with its limb hanging out over the water, but it has changed in that it only holds the memory of fear, it is now a shrunken, impotent reminder of a past age for Gene. The tree is proof that "Nothing endures, not a tree, not love, not even a death by violence" (6). And, most assuredly, as Gene demonstrates, the significance of a symbol-that too does not endure.**Blitzball and the Snowball Fight:** Blitzball is the game of the summer, invented by Phineas. It features no teams and places the odds against the ball-carrier, who must outrun every other competitor or be forced to relinquish possession to another participant, who, in turn, has the right to refuse the challenging task of being the ball-carrier. The game is a metaphor for the individual struggle of each student at Devon, who finds himself alone in a world without teammates, where conflicting emotions and desires impinge on the individual's success and well-being. Some, like Gene, grow weary and are tackled. Some, like Leper, refuse to even accept the challenge of carrying the ball. But Phineas alone excels at both the game and the game's metaphor: life as an adolescent about to become an adult. Finny is tireless and exuberant, surpassing every challenge and competitor, unafflicted by fear or lack of self-confidence. Later, after Finny's injury, a snowball fight breaks out among the students, a fight similar to blitzball in which everyone must fend for himself. This time, however, all forces turn on Phineas and he is buried beneath a barrage of snowballs. The significance here is similar to that of blitzball in that, because of Finny, "loyalties became hopelessly entangled" (146). But no longer can Finny win at his own game. His defeat in the snowball fight demonstrates his inability to surpass the hatred and insecurity around him. Finny's peace cannot withstand the onslaught of envy and competition that is directed toward him and he is the only character in the novel who is not beaten by himself, but a victim of everyone else's (most importantly Gene's) personal defeat.**Finny's Clothes:** When Phineas is away from Devon after breaking his leg, Gene puts on his clothes one night. This actions is, of course, a metaphor for Gene's desire to be Phineas, to embody the peace that he perceives in his friend. The costume provides a relief for Gene from the dark forces at work in his own character and, for an evening, he succeeds in becoming Phineas: "I had no idea why this gave me such intense relief, but it seemed, standing there in Finny's triumphant shirt, that I would never stumble through the confusions of my own character again" (54). The illusion cannot last and upon waking, Gene writes: "I was confronted with myself, and what I had done to Finny" (54).**The Winter Carnival:** A reckless and jubilant celebration in the dreary late winter months, the Winter Carnival becomes a metaphor for the ability to create peace and freedom in the midst of an environment that is characterized by rules and conflicts. During the carnival, the students achieve joy and a reprieve from the harsh demands of reality. It comes as no surprise, then, that the carnival is and thought of and organized by a character whose very nature abounds with peace and freedom: Phineas.**World War II and Phineas:** symbols for internal war and internal peace, respectively, the war and Phineas are the two largest metaphors whose significance is tied to the central thematic developments in the novel. Please see the Theme Review section for a discussion of how this event and this person become metaphors for the thematic action. |

Theme Analysis

|  |
| --- |
| As with most novels, it is best to begin a discussion of thematics by examining the title. The phrase, "a separate peace," is mentioned once in the novel when, speaking of the Winter Carnival, Gene writes: "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" (128). The Devon of 1942 and 1943 is, at times, a haven of peace and forgetfulness for Gene and his classmates. And it is significant that it is termed a "separate peace" because it indicates that the peace achieved is not part of the surrounding reality, which, for Gene, is a world of conflict, a world at war. The joy that the older Gene remembers upon re-visiting Devon is due to such momentary periods of complete freedom achieved during the summer of 1942 and the following schoolyear, moments when a sixteen year-old could live without conflict or rules, and forget about the encroaching reality of a world war.The novel is about a young man's struggle to achieve and maintain such a separate peace. And although the setting is in an America in the midst of war, the focus of the novel is internal. For the majority of the plot, the distant war is an illusion for the students in Gene's class, and for the reader, the war becomes the biggest metaphor of the novel: a metaphor for the internal conflict of a sixteen-year old boy. Gene's soul becomes a battleground where jealousy, fear, love, and hatred combat for control of his actions. And amidst the turmoil of adolescence, it is the victory of the dark forces of human nature that make Gene realize that each person is alone with his enemy, that the only significant wars are not made by external causes, but "by something ignorant in the human heart" (193). Thus, Finny's fantastic assertion that World War II is an illusion maintains a certain truth in light the real war that occurs in the story.The novel's conflict arises out of Gene's refusal to recognize his own feelings of jealousy and insecurity as the real enemy. Instead, his fears are projected onto his closest companion, Phineas, whom Gene suspects of possessing his own feelings of envy and self-loathing. With Finny as the enemy, Gene is plunged into a world of competition and hatred, where the only crucial elements worth preserving are his own survival and superiority. Ultimately, this act of self-deception drives Gene to malicious thoughts and behavior, destroying any feelings of affection and friendship he might have once had for Finny. Upon realizing his mistake and discovering that Phineas does not share Gene's envy and hatred, Gene's isolation and self-loathing deepen and he intentionally cripples the one person who wants to be his friend. As Gene writes, World War II is not the real scene of battle: "I was on active duty all my time at school: I killed my enemy there" (196).Knowles documents what happens when adolescence confronts manhood and the fears that develop when change becomes a reality. Gene, Brinker, and Leper all become casualties of this change by convincing themselves that the enemy, the cause of their fears, lies outside of themselves. Phineas is the one shining example to contrast the self-deception of his classmates, for Finny does not see the enemy in the people around him. Indeed, Finny does not see the enemy at all. He embodies the peace that Gene tries to achieve, his physical grace a reflection of the harmony within himself. Gene perceives in Phineas the harmony that he yearns for but cannot attain. Because of Gene's own insecurity, a reciprocal and non-competitive friendship becomes impossible. For though the two need each other and are often described by Gene as extensions of each other, the balance is unequal: Finny needs Gene as a companion and a friend, someone with whom to share in the challenges of growing up and facing the reality of adulthood; but Gene's need is born out of jealousy, he covets Phineas for the harmony and confidence that he himself does not have. And so rather than share in the friendship that Finny offers, Gene destroys the peace that he was unable to find in himself.Phineas is the novel's greatest casualty. He becomes a metaphor for the peace that is lost when Gene is too afraid to identify the enemy within himself. For indeed, Finny's harmony is damaged after his fall from the tree. He is forced to confront the overwhelming challenge of being crippled for life, and, most importantly, the horrifying realization that the person he thought was his friend is responsible for his injury. The task, it seems, is too great even for Phineas, who dies because of the hatred and insecurity around him. The peace and friendship that Gene lost, the peace that is Finny, becomes for Gene so internalized that he no longer perceives Finny as separate from himself, evidenced by his feeling that Finny's funeral is his own. |