

## ***A Separate Peace* by John Knowles**

### **Study Guide**

#### **Background Material on the Author:**

*All of my books are based on places, places I know very well and feel very deeply about. I begin with that place and then the characters and the plot emerge from it. . . A Separate Peace began with a playing field at Exeter Academy.* —John Knowles

Author John Knowles was born in 1926 in Fairmont, West Virginia, deep in the heart of coal-mining country. Although some of his works reflect his West Virginia roots—in *A Vein of Riches*, for example, he tells the story of an early twentieth-century miners strike—Knowles's best-known works are set in New England. His father and mother were originally from Massachusetts, and the family often spent summer vacations there.

Knowles's love of New England stems from his experiences as a student. At the age of fifteen, he applied to an elite New Hampshire boarding school, Phillips Exeter Academy. Much to his surprise, he was admitted. At first, Knowles felt out of place. He has said that his classmates seemed "too eastern for me, too Yankee, too tough," and that he found the New Hampshire winter "breathtakingly cold." Moreover, his grades were not the best. He admits: *It quickly seemed probable that I would flunk out. . . . Then somehow or other I knuckled down, learned by myself how to study, discovered I had a brain which had more potential than a knack for writing, and by the end of that first term, I was passing every course comfortably. . . . Meanwhile, I was falling in love with Exeter.*

Knowles's affection for the school is reflected in his first—and most famous—novel, *A Separate Peace*. Shortly after Knowles entered Exeter, the United States declared war on Japan and entered World War II. Like other young men of the time, Knowles went into the military after he graduated from high school. He trained to be a pilot in the United States Army Air Force aviation program, but when the war ended he decided to go back to school. He attended Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, where he received a bachelor's degree in 1949.

During his twenties, Knowles traveled and earned a living as a freelance writer. He wrote the stories "Phineas" and "A Turn in the Sun," which were to form the core of *A Separate Peace*. Knowles then took a job as an associate editor of a travel magazine. Early each morning, before going to the office, he worked on *A Separate Peace*.

The novel, which was first published in England in 1959 and the United States in 1960, proved to be a success—so much that Knowles was able to resign from his job and devote his time to writing and to travel. Since then, Knowles has written a variety of novels, a short story collection, a travel book, and several essays. None of these works has been as successful as *A Separate Peace*, but the fact does not seem to trouble him. He says that because he does not write with a particular audience in mind he is delighted that he has found any audience at all. Knowles may be too modest. He is likely to continue to have an audience for many years to come. Today, Knowles lives in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where he still writes.

#### **Be prepared to discuss each of the following on the test:**

1. Explain the stages of the plot development of the short stories: exposition, rising action, climax, and falling action. Be able to discuss details of each story important to the plot.
2. Discuss the conflict in the story—whether external or internal—and provide details.
3. Discuss the themes (main ideas or messages) of the story: growing up, friendship, and evil

4. Be able to discuss the following characters:

**Gene Forrester -**

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

**Finny -**

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

**Leper Lepellier -**

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

**Brinker Hadley -**

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

**Cliff Quackenbush -**

The manager of the crew team. Quackenbush briefly assumes a position of power over Gene when Gene volunteers to be assistant crew manager. The boys at Devon have never liked Quackenbush; thus, he frequently takes out his frustrations on anyone whom he considers his inferior.

**Chet Douglass -**

Gene's main rival for the position of class valedictorian. Chet is an excellent tennis and trumpet player and possesses a sincere love of learning.

**Mr. Ludsbury -**

The master in charge of Gene's dormitory. A stern disciplinarian, Mr. Ludsbury thrives on the unquestioning obedience of schoolboys and works hard to restore order after the anarchic summer session.

**Dr. Stanpole -**

Devon's resident doctor. Dr. Stanpole operates on Finny after both of Finny's accidents. He is a caring man who laments the troubles that afflict the youth of Gene's generation.

**Mr. Patch-Withers -**

The substitute headmaster of Devon during the summer session. Mr. Patch-Withers runs the school with a lenient hand.

5. Be able to discuss which characters are static and dynamic—dynamic characters change because of the conflict they face; static characters do not change.
6. Discuss point of view and its' importance in the story.
7. Be able to explain examples of figurative language (simile, metaphor, hyperbole, etc.).

#### SIMILES

- "...his back muscles working like a panther's"
- "...and his wife's head Fell as though before the guillotine."
- "...like one instrument after another being tentatively rehearsed."
- "Fear seized my stomach like a cramp."
- "...he looked, with his checkered outfit and blotchy face, like a half-prepared clown." "Peace lay on Devon like a blessing."
- "Preserved along with it, like stale air in an unopened room." "So the war swept over like a wave at the seashore, gathering power and size as it bore on us, overwhelming in its rush, seeming incapable and then at the last moment eluded by a word from Phineas."

#### METAPHORS

- "The tree was tremendous, an irate steely black steeple beside the river." "What I like best about this tree, he said in that voice of his,
- the equivaent in sound of a hypnotist's eyes..." "We seemed to be playing on the tame fringe of the last and greatest wilderness."
- "Someone was coming toward me, along the bent, broken lane..." "The newsreels and magazines were choked with images of blazing
- artillery and bodies half sunk in the sand of a beach somewhere."

#### PERSONIFICATION

- "The chocolate brown wicker furniture shot out menacing twigs." "To the right of them the gym meditated behind its gray walls." "The ocean perked up a little..." "A pattern of badminton nets swayed sensually in the breeze."

#### ALLITERATION

- "A suicide society," I said stiffly. The Suicide Society of the Summer Session."
- "The people in the world who could be selfish in the summer of were a small band..." "...the six o'clock bell from the Academy Building cupola, the, calmest most carrying bell toll in the world, civilized, calm, and final."

#### ONOMATOPEIA

- "...the bed groaning under him and the sheets hissing as he fought against them."

8. Be able to discuss the importance of the setting (time and place).

9. Be able to discuss the following symbols found in the story:  
the tree, the Devon River, and The Naguamsett

10. Be able to discuss the following vocabulary words as they are used in the novel:

prodigious  
regimen  
inanimate  
conceivable  
chronic

inane  
tentative  
anarchy  
inaccessible  
obliterate

opulent  
culminate  
judicious  
latent  
reverberate

11. Be able to answer the following questions: (The questions are not necessarily in the order that the answers may appear in the book; also, many of these questions will not be answer in the book, but will require thinking to piece everything together.)

Chapter 1:

1. Identify where and when the novel begins.
2. What mood is suggested by this setting? Give at least three clues that are given.
3. The setting and atmosphere change. Identify these changes.
4. The narrator views the tree as an adult and as a teenager. What does the adult narrator say about the tree?
5. How does sixteen-year-old Gene view the tree?
6. What special feelings does Gene have toward the tree?
7. What is accomplished by having Gene narrate the story?
8. What is Gene's purpose in returning to Devon?
9. How does Knowles reveal that Gene has finally accepted what happened and put the experience behind him?
10. How are Gene and Finny united after the jumps from the tree?

Chapter 2:

11. The narrator alludes to war. How is the war important to both students and faculty?
12. Finny "gets away with" two rebellious acts. What are they?
13. Tell how Gene feels about Pinny's ability to get away with things.
14. Why does Gene think that Finny practically saved his life?
15. Why does Finny say they "had to" jump out of that tree?
16. What is Gene's response when Finny "gets away with" wearing the tie?
17. Why doesn't Finny believe the bombing in Europe?
18. Why is the name "Suicide Society" appropriate?
19. Why does Gene reiterate that it is "perfectly natural" to envy a "best friend"?
20. What is significant in Pinny's instinctive move to save Gene?

Chapter 3:

21. The narrator alludes to specific people or terms related to World War II. List three.
22. Explain each of the following items. Tell what it is, and state its importance to character or plot development.  
Super Suicide Society  
Blitzball  
Hopkins Parker, 1940
23. State two of Pinny's major character traits.
24. Why does Gene continue jumping from the tree when he actually detests it?
25. Why does Gene try to blame Finny for saving his life?
26. What is the significance of Pinny's attitude toward sports?
27. What is a "blitzkrieg"?

28. What is the world that Gene remembers?
29. What is the significance of Pinny's swimming achievements?
30. What do we realize about Finny when he says Gene is his best friend? What do we realize about Gene when he says Finny is too good to be true?

#### Chapter 4:

31. Why does Gene take the bike ride to the beach when he feels he has logical reasons to remain at school?
32. Finny explains to Gene, "You can't come to the shore with just anybody and you can't come by yourself, and at this teen-age period in life the proper person is your best pal, which is what you are." What motivates Finny to give this explanation?
33. How does Gene react to Pinny's statement? What does this reaction reveal about Gene?
34. In speaking of the "war" between him and Prineas, Gene says, "The deadly rivalry was on both sides after all." Tell what Gene thinks about this "war."
35. Later, Gene changes his mind about the rivalry, "Now I knew that there was not and never could have been any rivalry between us. I was not of the same quality as he." What makes Gene change his mind?
36. While Finny is on the tree limb, what does Gene do? How, in effect, does this act change the rivalry or war previously reported?
37. Why does Finny say that he has to waste Gene's time "for him"?
38. What is significant in the mention of Pinny's broken ankle?
39. Why does Gene feel better when he thinks Finny has been sabotaging his efforts to be head of the class?
40. Why does Finny say that makes Gene want to destroy him?
41. Why is Gene cleansed of all fear after Finny falls?

#### Chapter 5:

42. As Gene wears Pinny's "triumphant" pink shirt, he feels that he is no longer confused about himself. Why?
43. When Gene talks with Finny in the hospital, what are Pinny's recollections about his fall and his thoughts about Gene?
44. At this point in the novel, what is Finny attitude toward Gene?
45. Later, at Pinny's home, Gene tries twice to explain to Finny what happened in the tree. What is Pinny's reaction to this information?
46. What might Gene mean when he says, "I was injuring him again. . . .?"
47. Why does Gene put on Pinny's clothes?
48. Why does Gene accuse Finny of trying to pull him down?
49. Why does Finny refuse to accept the truth of the accident?

#### Chapter 6:

50. Gene says "Peace had deserted Devon." Give two examples of what leads Gene to feel the peace of the summer has gone.
51. Describe the difference Gene notes between the Nagaumsett River and the Devon River. In what way does Gene connect these differences to the change in atmosphere at the school?
52. Why does Gene apply for assistant crew manager?
53. Gene describes his "skirmish" with Quackenbush as the first of many battles that he fights for Finny. Is this an accurate analysis? Why or why not?
54. Why does Finny say, referring to Gene's visit at Pinny's home, "You talked so crazy here
55. Why does Gene apply for the job of assistant crew manager?

56. How does Finny relate Gene's failure to take another roommate to the impossibility of Gene's confession? Why is it important that Finny feels shame at even thinking Gene might take another roommate?

Chapter 7:

57. Tell briefly what happens in the Butt Room when Brinker takes Gene there.
58. Tell how snow is described through war imagery.
59. List the important traits of each character, as revealed from the opening of the novel to the present: a) Brinker and b) Leper.
60. What does Leper do instead of helping to shovel out the troop train?
61. What decision does Gene make about the war? Supply two possible causes for Gene's decision.
62. What is significant to the scene between Brinker and Gene?
63. Why does he decide to join the army?
64. Why does Gene feel that evil lurks in everything he does?

Chapter 8:

65. What causes Gene to lose interest in enlisting?
66. Why does Gene say that peace has returned to Devon?
67. What argument does Finny use in defending his statement that there isn't any war?
68. Give Pinny's supposed reason for starting Gene in training as a runner.
69. How does Gene feel about his physical training under Pinny's direction? Tell how Gene's behavior, here, relates to his jumping from the tree.
70. What is the double irony in Gene's comment that Finny has had no practice in deception?
71. Why does Finny say Gene never knew himself before?

Chapter 9:

72. Why does Leper enlist in the army?
73. What is the purpose of the Winter Carnival? Where does it take place?
74. What sorts of activities does Gene participate in? What do these activities indicate about the mood of the day?
75. Describe Pinny's "choreography of peace."
76. The day of the Winter Carnival is described as "battleship gray." Give at least two interpretations of this description.
77. Gene calls the Winter Carnival "this afternoon of momentary, illusory, separate peace." Explain the special meaning of this phrase in relation to events at the school as a whole.
78. Identify and explain the event that contrasts sharply with the joy and peace of the afternoon.
79. What is the "separate peace" that Finny has established?

Chapter 10:

80. Leper calls Gene a savage. What else does he add?
81. Why has Leper "escaped" from the army?
82. In the closing paragraph of this chapter, Gene relates his reaction to Leper's hallucinations. Which of the following might his behavior indicate, and why? an uncaring attitude, disgust with Leper's weakness, fear of the world Leper describes.
83. What is the contrast of the two windows at Leper's house?
84. How has the war changed Leper?
85. Why does the exposure of Leper's deranged hallucinations bring the two boys close together?

### Chapter 11:

86. Why does Gene want to see Finny after Gene returns from visiting Leper?
87. At the playing field Finny quotes a statement of Dr. Stanhope. What is it? What does this quote foreshadow?
88. After their discussion about war, Finny says to Gene, "It's important after all for me to believe you. . . I know you better than anybody." Tell how Pinny's comment is ironic.
89. What effect does Leper's appearance at Devon have on Finny?
90. Describe the atmosphere in the Assembly Room. List three clues that suggest this atmosphere.
91. Brinker refers to a casualty. To whom is he referring, and why?
92. What are some of Pinny's answers to the questioning?
93. When does Finny clearly recall that Gene was in the tree with him?
94. Why is Leper called in? What are Gene's thoughts as Leper gives his recollections?
95. Why does Finny hurry from the room?
96. How is Gene's developing maturity shown?
97. What is Pinny's attitude during the trial?

### Chapter 12:

98. Contrast the mood of Chapter 11 to the mood at the opening of Chapter 12.
99. State the two observations that Gene makes about Finny after his fall on the
100. stairs.
101. How is Pinny's injury described? Why is this description ironic?
102. Tell why Finny pretends the war does not exist.
103. Are Finny and Gene at peace with each other at this point? Why or why not?
104. Tell how the operating room and war are compared.
105. Tell why Gene says, "I could not escape a feeling that this was my own funeral,
106. and you do not cry in that case."
107. How is the second broken leg different from the first?
108. What convinces Finny that Gene didn't mean to hurt him?
109. What is the significance of the way Finny dies?
110. Whose funeral does Gene attend?

### Chapter 13:

111. Tell how jeeps are compared to adolescents.
112. Devon is described again as peaceful. How does this description reflect Gene himself?
113. Gene says, "My schooling was over now." Beyond the literal meaning of his formal education, to what else is he referring?
114. What is Gene's final assessment of Finny?

## DISCUSSION

1. In the beginning what kind of person does Gene want to be?
2. What is his dual attitude toward Finny?
3. What is his attitude after Pinny's fall?
4. Each boy in the novel must make a decision in regard to the war. How do they choose?
5. What is the turning point in the novel?
6. Why does Gene say that Finny would be emotionally unsuited for war?
7. How does Gene grow up?