

ENGLISH I Required Summer Reading: *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles (provided to students)

Hello New Freshmen Students!

The required summer reading book for incoming freshmen is the novel *A Separate Peace*, which has been provided for you from the high school library. This reading guide provides general information about the novel, plus some questions on the back for "CLOSE READING". You are not required to write or type out the answers to these questions, but please refer to them before and during reading to help you understand key ideas. During the first week of school, everyone will be asked to do an in-class writing over a topic related to the novel, and we will then move on to discussion, activities, and assignments which will be your first few grades of the trimester. Please do wait until the last minute to start reading. Nothing is ever fun when we are rushed, and you will make it a lot harder for yourself if you are pressed for time! Remember that summer is 3 months long, and we are only requiring you to read ONE book! Hopefully you read many more over the course of your vacation. ☺ If you have any questions, you may email me at jtabacz@rayder.net, and I will get back to you as soon as possible. We look forward to seeing you in September!!

Genre: "Coming of age" (growing up/maturing) story of main characters

Point of view: The story has a "first-person" narrator, Gene Forrester. He is a character in the novel, as well as the story-teller, so he provides the "voice" that describes what happens. Most of what he describes is a FLASHBACK, so he is looking back on earlier life events he has already gone through 15 years before.

Setting (place): The story is set at Devon School, a private boarding school in New Hampshire on the Atlantic Coast. This school is very exclusive and boys-only. Two rivers run through the school's campus. One is the Devon River (fresh water) and the other is the Naguamsett River (salt water and swamp-like). **Setting (time):** The story begins in 1958 but quickly "flashes back" to the years 1942-1943. World War 2 is going on.

Background Information: The novel begins with the main character, Gene Forrester, narrating the story as he revisits his high school campus and recalls events that happened fifteen years earlier. In the flashback, he is back at Devon School for a summer session. The school hopes that this session will allow the students to receive a diploma before they are drafted on their eighteenth birthday. Gene and Finny are roommates and friends at the school. Finny is a natural athlete who also acts as a leader for the other boys in the school, devising games like Blitzball, and organizing the Winter Carnival. However, Gene is more academically oriented in his interests and is jealous of Finny's natural ability in sports, a quality he lacks in academics.

Major Characters:

Gene Forester: This character is the protagonist whose envy of Finny eventually leads to his untimely demise. He is also suspicious of Finny's motivations since his dark attitude about life causes him to assume the worst in other people.

Phineas (also called "Finny"): He is Gene's best friend who does not conform to school rules and tradition. This behavior is illustrated in his consistent lateness to dinner, wearing the school tie as a belt, wearing a pink shirt, organizing the Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session, etc.

Brinker Hadley: A student leader who is concerned about losing his power to Finny's popularity.

Elwin Lepellier (called "Leper"): An isolated student who spends most of his time alone and gets bullied by his classmates. He is important in the events of the novel since he was present when Finny "fell" from the oak tree. Leper surprises his classmates by choosing to enlist in the paratroopers after watching an army recruiter video, although he later deserts the army and returns home.

Main themes (messages about life) conveyed in the story:

- Jealousy and envy can cause dangerous outcomes.
- Irresponsibility and its effects
- Personal insecurity and denial about the way things really are
- The importance of true friendship

OVER FOR QUESTIONS →

Reading Guide --- Refer back to this often to keep yourself on track

Chapters 1-3

1. Looking at the stairs in the First Academy Building back at Devon Academy, what surprising fact does the narrator (Gene) realize he had overlooked about them? (Later we learn why this is important!)
2. When Gene visits the tree, what does it resemble to him? Evaluate his observation.
3. Gene states that the two places he wants to see at Devon School were "fearful sights." Why does he use this term? What is fearful about *marble stairs* or a *tree*? If they are so "fearful" to him, why do you think Gene wants to see them?
4. What does Phineas wear as a belt at the traditional tea? What does this tell us about his personality/character?
5. Gene admits that he is envious of Finny, who gets away with anything. He states that there is no harm in envying a best friend a little. Do you agree with Gene or not? Explain.
6. Why does Finny invent "blitzball" and how is it representative of him?

Chapters 4-6

1. What does Finny accuse Gene of striving for? Is he? Is Finny jealous?
2. Gene determines that Finny had deliberately set out to wreck Gene's grades with all his diversions. He blames Finny totally. Is Gene being realistic? Does Gene have any responsibility for his own actions? How is Gene's behavior typical of human nature?
3. After Gene jounces the limb, he hears Finny hit the bank with a thud. Why do you think Gene jounced the limb? Was his action premeditated? What were his thoughts about himself and Finny just prior to the jump? Gene then jumps from the limb for the first time without fear. What explanation can you offer for this?
4. Gene admits that if anyone had been suspicious of what he had done to Finny he might have developed some defense of himself. What does Gene mean? Why would have being accused have been easier to deal with?
5. Gene wants to tell Finny the truth about what happened and begins to do so. Why is it important for him to tell the truth? Who will it help more, him or Finny? Why?

Chapters 7-9

1. Why do you think Gene is unable to say he had pushed Finny out of the tree? What had he promised himself he would do when Finny returned to Devon? What effect might his admission to the other boys of what he had done have on the relationship between him and Finny?
2. What are the conclusions Finny has about war? Why do you think he says this?
3. What is the plan Finny develops for Gene. Why does Finny develop a plan and why does Gene agree to it? What could this show about the mental state of each boy?
4. Leper signs the telegram he sends to Gene, "Your best friend." Why do you think Leper does this? Has there been any indication that Gene is Leper's friend, particularly a best friend?

Chapters 10-13

1. What conclusion does Gene come to about Leper's "escape"?
2. Leper accuses Gene of being a "savage underneath". What example does he use to make his point?
3. Why does Brinker believe Gene has put off enlisting in the war? How does Brinker say Finny should be treated? Why?
4. When Gene takes Finny's suitcase to the Infirmary, what does Finny admit he has been doing all winter? What has been the result? Analyze Finny's behavior.
5. Gene tells Finny that what he did to him wasn't "anything personal," that it was just "some ignorance inside" him, "something blind." What do you think about this? Do you feel he is being honest? Dishonest? Why?
6. At the story's end, Devon is once again described as "peaceful". How does this relate to Gene himself?
7. Gene says, "My schooling was over now." Beyond the literal meaning (he had finished his formal school education), what else does this imply?

A helpful resource available as a COMPANION to reading, NOT in replacement of reading is:

http://www.cliffsnotes.com/study_guide/literature/A-Separate-Peace.id-168.html

A reading of the novel on CD has also been provided to students who qualify for special education services.