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War and a Separate Peace

Most of the time, 16 year old boys concern themselves with girls, cars, and sports, but in the lives of Gene and Finny, two main characters who become best friends in the John Knowles novel A Separate Peace, this is not the case. America is engaged in World War II, and the two boys fear being drafted into a war that has already taken the lives of thousands of young men. Gene and Finny differ in how each copes with his insecurities and fears about war and about growing up. These contrasts are found in the ways that each boy deals with his conformity to school regulations and traditions, with his acceptance of the reality of war, and with his bond as a friend to the other.

Both boys attend Devon, a private boarding school in New Hampshire and an institution that expects its students to conform to the rules, as young adults should. In this area, Gene and Finny are drastically different. Gene races to the dining hall at the prescribed time, but Finny goes out of his way to be late. Gene wears the prescribed school shirt and the proper tie around his neck while Finny sports a pink shirt and uses the school tie as a belt around his waist. Gene, the conformist, agrees with Devon's policy prohibiting unsanctioned clubs, but Finny, the nonconformist, starts the Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session in spite of the rules. In this area, the two best friends are remarkably different.

Gene and Finny both face the real possibility that they will be drafted into the army to fight in World War II. Each has his own way of dealing with this reality. Gene sees the seriousness of their situation and plans to enlist rather than wait to be drafted. On the other hand, Finny simply denies that the war exists. Gene is pulled by Finny into "blitzball," a game of Finny's design intended to distract them from the realities of war. Despite the distractions, Gene seems to romanticize war by picturing his role in it, but Finny thinks the war is a fictional creation of fat politicians and refuses to accept any logical argument to the contrary.

Gene and Finny, opposites in almost every way, are portrayed as best friends. Indeed, the two seem inseparable at times. Even so, Gene harbors a cynical attitude caused by his own insecurities that prompts him to distrust Finny and the other boys. In contrast, Finny believes that everybody is innately good. He resists believing that Gene could have purposely caused him to fall from a tree. Eventually, Gene comes to think of Finny as the enemy, who is trying intentionally to make him do poorly in the academics. In reality, Finny sees Gene's strengths in academics, believing that Gene will succeed regardless of the time he spends studying. Eventually, jealousy motivates Gene to harm Finny. Finny's pure heart makes him deny the obvious truth that Gene shook him from the tree. Gene regrets his actions soon after his deed was done and is prompted by the other boys to admit his guilt to Finny during a trial that they had organized. Finny refuses to accept Gene's confession as truthful and flees from the room. He falls on the steps, reinjuring his leg, and eventually, he dies from complications in his recovery from the accident.

Gene and Finny were best friends. But, they are also 16 year old boys facing a world in conflict. It is too much to expect that they would harbor no insecurities and no fears. Gene's jealousy and Finny's naivety are also

understandable at their age. A Separate Peace is a story of two best friends who face the uncertainty of life after adolescence with tragic consequences.

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