A Separate Peace And A Real War Essay, Research Paper

A Separate Peace and A Real War

In his book A Separate Peace John Knowles communicates what war really is. He uses a number of complex characters in a very complicated plot in order to convey the harsh, sad, cruel, destructive forces of war. The Characters Gene and Finny are used as opposing forces in a struggle between that cold reality of war-that is World War II in this story-and a separate peace. A peace away from the real war and all of the terrible things that come with it. Through their relationship, that is a struggle on both sides form the beginning, Knowles establishes the reality of war in all of its essence.

Gene Forrester is established as the force of reality which is the war. This idea is established clearly in a lengthy speech Gene gives as the narrator of the story in Chapter Three:

Everyone has a moment in history which belongs particularly to him. It is the moment when his emotions achieve their most powerful sway over him, and afterward when you say to this person "the world today" or "life" or "reality" he will assume that you mean this moment, even if it is fifty years past. The world, through his unleashed emotions, imprinted itself upon him, and he carries the stamp of that passing moment forever. (32)

This statement explains that Gene must have something that is his "stamp." This stamp appears to define an individual-exemplifying what he stands for. It is found that this is true in the next paragraph where Gene continues, "For me, this moment-four years is a moment in history-war the war. The war was and is reality for me. I still live and think in its atmosphere" (32). Later in the same paragraph he goes on to say:

America is not, never has been, and never will be what the songs and poems call it, a land of plenty. Nylon, meat, gasoline, and steel are rare. There are too many jobs and not enough workers. Money is very easy to earn but rather hard to spend, because there isn?t very much to buy. . .The war will always be fought very far away from America and it will never end. Nothing in America stands still for very long, including the people, who are always either leaving or on leave. (32)

This is what Gene stands for in the story of A Separate Peace. Gene appears to omnisciently understand the reality of war and how it effects people. Throughout the entire story Gene is used to bring in the destructive reality of war into the everyday life at Devon High School where there is an attempt to create, and exist in, a separate peace.

There is however quite an opposition to this reality-known by Gene-that is headed by Gene?s best friend Finny. Finny has his own "reality." Finny displays this reality throughout the whole book just as Gene acts throughout the whole book. From the perspective of the narrator, Gene, Finny?s world is one where there are a lot of things that Finny does to try and substitute for the real war. This world or "reality" that Finny creates and exists in is the separate peace spoken of earlier.

Finny first begins to create this separate peace with games. Because Finny can?t face the reality of the real war these games are representative of the war. Finny makes the rules so that he can exist in these games as a force that is indomitable. The first game Finny invents is "The Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session." This game consists of jumping of the limb of a tree into the river by Devon High School. As the game is invented both Finny and Gene agree to get it started they must jump out of the tree and in to the river first. Finny allows Gene to jump first. This is where there is a foreshadow of the fall from the separate peace:

We were standing on a limb, I a little farther out than Finny. I turned to say something else, some stalling remark, something to delay even a few seconds more, and then I realized that in turning I had begun to lose my balance. There was a moment of total, impersonal panic, and then Finny?s hand shot out and grabbed my arm, and with my balance restored, the panic immediately disappeared. (24)

In this instance Finny is able to save Gene from falling out of his world into Gene?s "reality." The idea of Gene understanding that this is really Finny?s world comes at the beginning of Chapter Three, "Yes, he had practically saved my life. He had also practically lost it for me. I wouldn?t have been on that damn limb except for him." Here Gene knows that his going into Finny?s reality could have completely taken his reality or life away. This game appears to be a substitute for the real war more and more as Chapter Three progresses. Gene goes on to explain how he and Finny signed up "trainees" on the spot and how they initiated them every night (25). This clearly resembles the basic training and initiating of real soldiers in the war.

Finny also creates another game that substitutes for the real war: Blitzball. It is known that this game is related to the war because a boy present during the invention of the game, Bobby Zane, comments, "Let?s make it have something to do with the war." Finny likes this idea and goes with it. He goes on to make up all kinds of rules. After all of the parts of the game are invented Gene realizes that, "He had unconsciously invented a game which brought his own athletic gifts to their highest pitch." What may be even a more important statement is what Gene says following the last statement"

The odds were tremendously against the ball carrier, so that Phineas was driven to exceed himself practically every day when he carried the ball. To escape the wolf pack which all the other players became he created reverses and deceptions and acts of sheer mass hypnotism which were so extraordinary that they surprised even him.(31)

Finny made up this sport and he made it so that he could be in control. This is just like Finny?s world of separate peace.

Finny continues to allude Gene?s reality that is the real war in much the same way he does in the games he invents. He continues with this theme by really never getting in trouble. He always has come charming way to make up his own rules that he can abide by while disobeying the real rules. In doing this no one seems to hold Finny responsible-they never really make him abide by the real rules. In Chapter Two Finny wears a pink shirt which he explains is an emblem for the bombing of Central Europe (18). He explains that because he has no flag to fly for them-or anything else related-he will wear the pink shirt. Finny avoids having to conform to the real rules in school that day when Mr. Patch-Withers asks Finny about it-surly because he normally disapproves of such rebellious behavior. Finny again explains what he explained to Gene and avoids any trouble. Gene comments, "It was hypnotism. I was beginning to see that Phineas could get away with anything." Further evidence of Finny?s ability to make his world-or separate peace-comes on the following page. Mr. Patch-Withers offers the "traditional term tea to the Upper Middle Class" (18). While at this event Finny explains all of his thoughts about the bombing of central Europe. While doing so he poses a question to others, "I think we ought to bomb the daylights out of them, as long as we don?t hit any women or children or old people, don?t you?" He continues, "Or hospitals. . .And Naturally no schools. Or churches." An argument over whether such a feat could be accomplished on the physical level ensues, but what is really important is that Finny says this when it really is not very plausible-and remains quite implausible up until the late 1980s. Finny doesn?t fully understand the impact of war on people-he doesn?t understand that war kills people physically and mentally and he doesn?t understand that it effects everyone that has a close relationship with the it (not including himself). It effects women, children, old people, hospitals, churches and schools. Finny has created a false reality here and it is emphasized even more on the next page when he says he believes that, "the school is involved in everything that happens in the war, it?s all the same was and the same world" (20). The truth is that the war is partially involved in the war, but not the way Finny believes it is. Finny has created a separate peace at Devon that he substitutes for the real war.

Meanwhile, Gene understands that the land that the war is being fought on is, "All foreign lands. . .inaccessible except to servicemen; they are vague, distant, and sealed off as though behind a curtain of plastic." This passage shows us that although Gene may not have fought in the war and had first hand experiences of the terrible destruction of it, he has possibly the best understanding he can without being in the war and he appreciates the war for what it is. This is unlike Finny who creates his own war within Devon-which is really a separate peace because of its lack of the real characteristics of the real war.

There is turning point in the book at which all of this creation of a separate peace that is not the real war stops and the reality that Gene knows-the one that is real-begins to become more clear. A very important event occurs in Chapter Four. One evening as Gene is studying for an exam, Finny announces that Leper is going to take his first leap from the tree. This requires the attendance of Gene. When the boys get to the tree to jump Finny suggests that he and Gene jump side by side. This is the first time that we get to see the symbolism of setting Gene?s reality next to Finny?s reality to compare the two. While on the limb, somehow, Gene "jounced the limb" (52). Finny fell to the hard shore violently and "shattered" on of his legs while Gene jumps "with unthinking sureness." Here we see that when the two realities are compared side by side Finny?s falls and shatters.

Later in that same chapter Gene puts on Finny?s clothes and looks in the mirror to see that he appears to be just like Finny (54). In doing this he understands how each of them are struggling to realize the correct reality. Finny sees his reality and Gene sees his own but together they are still very similar even though their ideas about reality are different. The chapter continues with Dr. Stanpole revealing to Gene that, "sports are finished" for Finny. This takes away Finny?s way to create his separate peace.

Finny is not present for the beginning of the fall session at Devon and as a result Chapter Six begins with the statement, "Peace had deserted Devon" (64). This indicates the lack of peace, the peace that the school had come to know when Finny was present-a separate peace. With the lack of this peace the door is open for the reality that is war to enter. Throughout Chapter Six we begin to see more and more of the real war to seep into Devon. We find that, "Five of the younger teachers were missing, gone into the war. Mr. Pike had come in his Naval ensign?s uniform. . ." With all of this happening Finny is not going to give up his reality without a fight. Finny finds out that Gene had signed up as an assistant to a team and informs Gene that "if I can?t play sports, you?re going to play them for me" (77). Gene doesn?t put up any argument to this idea because of his deep friendship with Finny. The fact that he has hurt Finny a lot recently probably also has something to do with his lack of argument. After all Finny still is his best friend and hurting a best friend is hard to do even when you know that, to reveal the truth, sometimes you have to.

The previous exchange is forgotten for a while as school begins. When it begins to snow two hundred boys are recruited to help shovel snow off of the railroad yards in a near by town as part of "the war effort" (88). This is just the beginning of the war?s seepage into life at Devon. Later in that same chapter we find the war is effecting the boys even more where Brinker announces, "I?m giving it up, I?m going to enlist. Tomorrow."

In that same chapter Finny returns to Devon to Gene?s surprise. During their conversation in their room Finny finds out that there are no maids this semester because of the war. Gene comments on this, "After all, there is a war on" (96). Finny?s intuiting response is, "Is there?" It is hard to say if Finny is being sarcastic or meaning something different than what is sounds like with this comment. One can, however, know that the fact that he said this is important because it is in the book at all. With this in mind it would make sense that this is a comment on Finny?s lack of understanding for the real war that is occurring. Later we find that Gene is thinking about enlisted to serve in the war but he decides no to because he doesn?t want to desert his friend who he has hurt enough already. With this in mind Gene comments, as the narrator, "peace had come back to Devon." This indicates that Finny?s ideas of the separate peace had returned and Finny tries to establish them again after being away so long.

The beginning of Finny?s attempt to revitalize his separate peace takes place when he tells Gene, "You?re going to be the big star now." Gene is hesitant to take this on and goes on to explain that sports didn?t seem as important to him with the war on. Finny responds to this, "Have you swallowed all that war stuff. . . there isn?t any war." This is the point at which Gene comes to realize that Finny doesn?t believe there is a real war going on. Finny goes on to make Gene do what he can no longer do: compete physically. He does this in order to keep the idea of the separate peace alive. The idea of Finny not understanding the war is emphasized more when Finny tells Gene that he is going to train him for the Olympics in 1944. Gene responds by telling Finny "there isn?t going to be any Olympics in ?44. That?s only a couple years away. The war-" Finny?s response is, "Leave your fantasy life out of this. We?re grooming you for the Olympics, pal, in 1944." Finny openly defies the idea that there is a war going on and that it is effecting people around the world. The 1944 Olympics do not occur. This is the beginning of the end for Finny?s separate peace and the events that follow bring out the undeniable reality of the war. It becomes ever more apparent as Leper enlists and the senior boys are solicited during the winter months by members of the armed forces recruitment teams. Finny continues his lack of belief by getting involved with the Winter Carnival. Finny does this in an attempt to show everyone the peace that he believes is real. The end of Finny?s separate peace continues though when, during the Winter Carnival, he receives a telegram. Gene takes the telegram from Finny and reads it, it reads:

I HAVE ESCAPED AND NEED HELP. I AM AT CHRISTMAS LOCATION. YOU UNDERSTAND. NO NEED TO RISK ADDRESS HERE. MY SAFETY DEPENDS ON YOU COMING AT ONCE.

(signed) YOUR BEST FRIEND,

ELWIN LEPER LEPELLIER.

Gene goes to visit Leper and finds he has changed. The first thing he notices is Leper?s left side of his lip lifting involuntarily. Gene comes to find that Gene abandoned the Army after realizing that he was going to receive a Section Eight any ways (a Section Eight is a discharge because of a lack of psychological control). It is found that Leper does appear to have mental illness and has turned into a violent person who is very angry-something that Leper definitely wasn?t before he was in the war. Gene brings the news of Leper?s situation back to the school to lay out the undeniable confirmation of the war. Leper has proven to us that there is a war and that it can kill the body and spirit-it is destructive.

The boys eventually come to hold a trial with Gene to find out the truth about the fall that Finny took from the tree. We never really find out if Gene jounced the limb on purpose or if he believes he did-all of this is very ambiguous. The most important event during the meeting is Finny?s realization though. As the boys are arguing to try and find the truth Finny says, "I just don?t care. Never mind" (169). Brinker cries to Finny as he runs away, "Wait a minute! We haven?t heard everything yet. We haven?t got all the facts." Gene narrates, "The words shocked Phineas into awareness" (169). Finny has become aware of the real truth and runs to the stairs in the hallway and Gene narrates, "Then these separate sounds collided into the general tumult of his body falling clumsily down the white marble stairs" (169). Finny?s separate peace has fallen-literally and figuratively. The operation that Finny must undergo is supposedly simple. The operation is simple but a complication occurs and Finny dies. With Finny dies his separate peace. With the force of Finny?s separate peace on Devon the war comes full-fledged into Devon in the person of troops from Parachute Riggers? school, who take over the Far Common. Gene realizes this as he walks down the halls to hear the P.T. instructors voice yelling, "Hut! Hew! Hee! Hore!" Indeed Gene?s reality is the truth: the war is very real and very destructive.

John Knowles communicates what war really is. He uses complex characters in a very complicated plot in order to convey the harsh, sad, cruel, destructive forces of war. Gene and Finny?s relationship that includes the opposition illustrates this fact. Their relationship is used by Knowles to establish the terrible reality of war in all of its essence.

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