A Separate Peace: Finny – How Things Change Essay, Research Paper

A Separate Peace: Finny – How Things Change

In the novel “A Separate Peace,” by John Knowles, a boy named Gene

visits his high school 15 years after graduating in order to find an inner peace.

While attending the private boys school during the second World War, Gene’s

best friend Phineas died and Gene knows he was partially responsible. Phineas,

or Finny as he was sometimes called, was the most popular boy in school. He was

a handsome, taunting, daredevil athlete. Gene, on the other hand, was a lonely,

self-sufficient intellectual. Somehow the two became good friends, or so Finny

thought. Gene, unfortunately, was bitten by the green-eyed monster of jealousy.

Gene just couldn’t come to grips with the idea that a person of Finny’s stature

would want to be his friend. Gene’s envy grew to a point where he was willing

to severely injure Finny for being too perfect. Unfortunately for Finny, Gene

succeeded. Finny’s seeming perfection, his strong beliefs, and his ability to

forgive trace his development throughout the novel.

Finny’s seeming perfection was the basis for Gene’s resentment towards

him. Gene thought that everything Finny did was perfect, which just upset Gene

all the more. Finny was so perfect that he didn’t care what others thought,

like when Finny wore a pink shirt as an emblem after the bombing of central

Europe. ” ‘…Pink! It makes you look like a fairy!’ ‘Does it?’ He used this

preoccupied tone when he was thinking of something more interesting than what

you had said.” One time Finny and Gene were at the swimming pool when Finny

noticed that a boy named A. Hopkins Parker had the record for the 100 yards free

style. When Finny realized that A. Hopkins Parker had graduated before they

came, he remarked, “I have a feeling I can swim faster than A. Hopkins Parker.”

He was right. Gene was ecstatic that Finny could do such a thing without any

training or anything. All Gene could say was, “You’re too good to be true.” In

certain ways he was.

Throughout the book Gene knows that Finny has some strong beliefs. The

first three he noticed were: “Never say you are five feet nine when you are

really five feet eight and a half”; “Always say some prayers at night because it

might turn out that there is a god”; and “You always win at sports.” The latter

of the three was amazing because to Finny all you had to do was play to win at a

sport. Unfortunately, this all added up to a point where jealousy overcame Gene

and caused him to injure Finny. Gene and Finny had started a Super Suicide

Society which included a jump from both Finny and Gene at the beginning of every

meeting. This time Finny came up with the idea that they both jump at the same

time. They were in the tree with Finny farther out on the jumping limb when

Gene’s “…knees bent and I jounced the limb.” Finny fell and shattered his leg.

Gene became overwhelmed by sorrow because he had caused his best friend to

shatter his leg. The most athletic person in the school could no longer play

sports. Gene eventually got up the nerve to go to Finny and tell him the truth

about causing the fall. However when he got to him it was Finny who apologized,

saying, “I’m sorry about that, Gene,” Meaning, he regretted the feeling he had

that Gene had actually caused him to fall. Finny believed that a friend would

never do a thing like that.

Finny was a great person and one of his best qualities was his ability

to forgive. Gene and Finny became friends again once Finny was able to return

to school. All seemed well until the boy in the room across the hall started to

get suspicious that Finny didn’t accidentally fall out of the tree. He wound up

tricking Gene and Phineas into going to a investigation to find out what really

happened. The investigation included the testimony of a witness who was at the

meeting when Finny fell. He said, “they moved like an engine… The one holding

on to the trunk sank for a second, up and down like a piston, and then the other

one sank and fell.” Finny realized what had happened and took off out the door,

but then slipped on the marble steps and rebroke his leg. Gene felt terrible

remorse and he hid in some bushes just so he could talk with Finny. Finny was

still upset the first time Gene was able to talk to him through the window at

the infirmary, saying, “You want to break something else in me!” Gene was able

to speak with Finny, face to face, when he was asked to bring some of Finny’s

clothes to the infirmary.

“It was some blind impulse you had in the tree there, you didn’t know

what you were doing. Was that it?”

“Yes, yes, that was it. Oh, that was it, but how can you believe that?”

“I do, I think I can believe that. I’ve gotten awfully mad sometimes

and almost forgotten what I was doing…It wasn’t anything personal.”

“No, I don’t know how to show you, how can I show you, Finny?”

“I believe you. It’s okay because I understand and I believe you.

You’ve already shown me and I believe you.” Finny forgave Gene and all was well,

at least for a little while.

Finny’s development can be seen throughout the novel by tracing his

seeming perfection, his strong beliefs, and his ability to forgive. Finny

changed from being the best athlete in the school to being the only one who

couldn’t go to the war. Finny was a very good person. Finny was a very firm

believer in what he thought was right. Finny was a very forgiving person,

believing in the forgiveness of friends. Unfortunately, Finny died due to the

negligence of the school doctor. When Finny’s leg was being set some bone

marrow escaped into his blood stream stopping his heart. When Gene heard this

news he didn’t cry. Gene felt that, along with Phineas, he himself had died,

and you don’t cry at your own funeral. Gene went back to his school to come to

grips with the fact that he was partially responsible for Finny’s death. Finny

was not perfect; D’s on his tests and bad grades show that. But to Gene, Finny

was perfect and always would be.