A Separate Peace: Three Symbols Essay, Research Paper

A Separate Peace: Three Symbols

The three dichotomous symbols in A Separate Peace by John Knowles

reinforce the innocence and evil of the main characters, Finny and Gene. Beside

the Devon School flow two rivers on opposite sides of the school, the Naguamsett

and the Devon. The Devon provides entertainment and happiness for Gene and

Finny as they jump from the tree into the river and hold initiations into the

Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session. Finny, Gene, and their friends use

the Devon’s warm water to play in during the carefree summer session. The Devon

brings out Finny’s carefree character and personality when he jumps from the

limbs of the tree. Not one Upper Middler in Devon has ever jumped from the

tree; Finny becomes the first. After surfacing, Finny says that jumping from

the tree causes the most fun he has had in weeks. However, the Naguamsett and

the Devon completely contrast. When Gene and Finny emerge from the Devon, they

feel clean and refreshed. However, Gene describes the Naguamsett as “ugly,

saline, fringed with marsh, mud and seaweed” (68). When Gene starts a fight

with Quackenbush and falls into the Naguamsett because Quackenbush calls Gene “a

maimed son-of-a-bitch,” Gene surfaces from the Naguamsett feeling grimy, dirty

and in desperate need of a bath (71). Much like the clean, refreshing water of

the Devon and the ugly saline water of the Naguamsett, Gene’s carefree attitude

of the summer session vastly differs from the angry, confused attitude of the

winter session.

Likewise, the two sessions, the summer and winter, give a different

sense of feeling toward school and life at Devon School. The summer session

allows Finny to use his creativity. Finny invents blitzball and founds the

Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session. The students let their carefree

attitudes flow during the summer. Finny and Gene willingly break the rules to

have fun during the summer by skipping class and going to the beach. Finny also

wears the school tie as a belt to the traditional term tea. Gene feels that

Finny cannot leave the room without being disciplined, but Finny manages to talk

his way out of the mess. However, the winter session causes a sense of

strictness. The sermons now exhort the thought of “what we owe Devon,” but in

the summer the students think of “what Devon owes us” (65). The masters and

class leaders try to enforce continuity, but Gene realizes that resurrecting the

summer session becomes impossible. Finny is not in school, no longer shall the

students have their carefree attitudes, and the class officials and masters now

enforce the rules at Devon. Gene becomes like the winter session by saving a

cold blast for the enemy. The winter lives to destroy the warmth of the summer

and does so by unleashing an unpredictable frigid blizzard. Likewise, Gene

destroys Finny by releasing an uncontrolled jouncing of the tree limb.

Nevertheless, the peaceful time and the war time clearly display the

innocence of Finny and the evil of Gene. During the peaceful time, not one

student thinks about a war. Gene and Finny play blitzball and jump from the

tree, making them both happy. Finny willingly breaks the rules at Devon. Like

the summer session, the rules do not exist, and the student’s minds run wild

with carelessness. Finny’s imagination and creativity explode during the

peaceful time with inventions like blitzball and the founding of the Super

Suicide Society of the Summer Session. However, the war, like the winter

session, brings about confusion and hostility. Students like Leper and

Quackenbush begin thinking about enrolling in the army. Even Gene considers

enlisting until he realizes that Finny needs him. Finny cannot handle the

changes during the winter session. When Gene explains to Finny that a war is

occurring, Finny wonders, “Is there?” (96). Finny refuses to believe in the war

when Gene explains that the war comes before sports. Finny comes to the

conclusion that old fat men in Washingtion, D.C. “make up” the war to trick the

people, and only the fat men understand the trick. The two rivers, the two

sessions, and the two settings, reinforce and clearly display the innocence of

Finny and the evil of Gene.

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