A Seperate Peace Essay, Research Paper

In the novel “A Separate Peace,” by John Knowles, a man named Gene visits his high school 15 years after graduating in an attempt to find an inner peace with himself. While attending Devon, his high school, during World War Two, Gene’s roommate and best friend Phineas died partially because of an accident involving Gene. Phineas, otherwise known as Finny, was one of the more popular and athletic boys in school. He was a brave, cunning, attractive guy that had total trust in his best friend Gene. On the other hand, Gene was a lonely, self-sufficient intellectual. The two became great friends, but Finny is eventually led down a trail of betrayal, deceit, and jealousy by his best friend.

Gene couldn’t imagine that a person of Finny’s stature would want to be his best friend. Gene envied Finny for all that Gene believed Finny to be. His envy grew to a point where he was subconsciously willing to injure Finny for being the great athlete that he happened to be. To Finny’s dismay, Gene succeeded in injuring his leg, shattering it in multiple places. Finny’s perfection was the basis for Gene’s resentment towards him. Gene envied everything that Finny did. Finny seemed to be so perfect to Gene. Finny was so confident that he didn’t care what others thought about his appearance. One example was when Finny wore a pink shirt as an emblem of the bombing of central Europe. Gene told Finny, “‘ …Pink! It makes you look like a fairy!” “Does it?’” he replied. “He used this preoccupied tone when he was thinking of something more interesting than what you had said,” commented Gene. Another example of this occurred when Finny and Gene were at the school swimming pool when Finny happened to notice that a boy named A. Hopkins Parker held the school record for the 100 yard free style. Finny realized that A. Hopkins Parker had graduated a few years before he and Gene had even been to Devon. After acknowledging this he remarked, “I have a feeling I can swim faster than A. Hopkins Parker.” He blew away Parker’s time. Gene envied Finny due to the fact that he had broken a school record without any formal training. Gene could only respond “You’re too good to be true.”

Gene and Finny started a Super Suicide Society. The society was formed in the summer of 1942. The society met every night, and the meeting of this society was always opened with a jump from both Finny and Gene out of an immense tree that hung out over a nearby river. It was quite a large jump to be able to clear the branch and be able to hit the river. After several weeks, Finny came up with the idea that they could do a double jump, that is they both were to jump out of the tree at the same time. They proceeded to climb the tree. When they got to the branch that they always jumped from Gene’s “…knees bent and… bounced the limb.” Finny fell to the ground and shattered his leg upon impact. As a result, Finny’s sport’s career at Devon forever ceased. When Gene had fully realized this he became depressed realizing that he was the cause of ending his roommate and best friend’s ability to play sports.

Gene eventually had 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.” Phineas was sorry that he had the feeling that Gene actually caused him to fall.

Finny believed strongly that a true friend would never knock his friend out of a tree. Finny was a great person and one of his best qualities was his ability to forgive. Gene and Finny became friends instantly after Finny was able to return to school. All was well until the boy in the room across the hall started having suspicious that Finny didn’t accidentally fall out of the tree without a little bit of Phineas’ help. He wound up dragging Gene and Phineas out of bed and convinced them to attend an investigation to find out what really happened. The investigation included the testimony of a witness who was at the meeting when Finny fell. He stated in front of the crowd of boys, “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 really happened and began to walk out the door. He was careless and slipped on a slick marble step, rebreaking his leg. Afterwards, Gene felt terrible remorse and hid in some bushes outside the school infirmary 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 got the opportunity 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?” To that Finny responded, “Yes, yes, that was it. Oh, that was it, but how can you believe that?” Finny said in reply, “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.” Gene said, “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,” said Finny. Phineas forgave Gene and life for the two became somewhat normal, but only for a little while.

Unfortunately, Finny died due to the negligence of the school doctor. The doctor felt that because the bone had such a clean break that he could do it himself in the school infirmary. When the doctor went to set Finny’s leg, bone marrow escaped into his blood stream which stopped his heart. Gene, upon hearing this bad news did not cry. Gene felt that, along with Finny, part of himself had died, and he states that you just don’t cry at your own funeral. Gene went back to his school knowing that he was partially responsible for Finny’s death.

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. He was a very firm believer in what he thought was right, a very forgiving person, believing in the forgiveness of friends. Finny was not perfect. He was a D average student. But to Gene, Finny was perfect and always would be. Gene redeemed Finny’s trust by being honest and open with him after the accident.