Symbols In A Separate Peace Essay, Research Paper

In John Knowle’s A Separate Peace, symbols are used to develop and advance the themes of the novel. One theme is the lack of an awareness of the real world among the students who attend the Devon Academy. The war is a symbol of the “real world”, from which the boys exclude themselves. It is as if the boys are in their own little world or bubble secluded from the outside world and everyone else. Along with their friends, Gene and Finny play games and joke about the war instead of taking it seriously and preparing for it. Finny organizes the Winter Carnival, invents the game of Blitz Ball, and encourages his friends to have a snowball fight. When Gene looks back on that day of the Winter Carnival, he says, “—it was this liberation we had torn from the gray encroachments of 1943, the escape we had concocted, this afternoon of momentary, illusory, special and separate peace” (Knowles, 832). As he watches the snowball fight, Gene thinks to himself, “There they all were now, the cream of the school, the lights and leaders of the senior class, with their high IQs and expensive shoes, as Brinker had said, pasting each other with snowballs”(843).

Another of the principal themes in this novel is the theme of maturity. The two rivers that are part of the Devon School property symbolize how Gene and Finny grow up through the course of the novel. The Devon River is preferred by the students because it is above the dam and contains clean water. It is a symbol of childhood and innocence because it is safe and simple. It is preferred which shows how the boys choose to hold onto their youth instead of growing up. The Naguamsett is the disgustingly dirty river which symbolizes adulthood because of its complexity. The two rivers intermingle showing the boys’ changes from immature individuals to slightly older and wiser men.

Sooner or later, Gene and Phineas, who at the beginning of the novel are extremely immature, have to face reality. Signs of their maturity appear when the boys have a serious conversation about Finny’s accident. Finny realizes that Gene did shake the tree limb purposely so that he would fall. However, he knows that this action was spontaneous, and that Gene never meant to cause him life-long grief. Finny sympathetically says to his best friend, “Something just seized you. It wasn’t anything you really felt against me, it wasn’t some kind of hate you’ve felt all along. It wasn’t anything personal” (865). Gene admits to Finny that he feels incredibly guilty and replies, “It was some ignorance inside me, some crazy thing inside me, something blind, that’s all it was” (865).

Phineas’ death is the end of Gene’s childhood. He is forced to grow up when he realizes that he is living in a world of hate, crime, and disappointment. He is getting older and closer to his eighteenth birthday when he will be drafted into the war, and he finally begins to prepare. At the conclusion of the novel, after Phineas is gone, Gene says, “I was ready for the war, now that I no longer had any hatred to contribute to it. My fury was gone, I felt it gone, dried up at the source, withered and lifeless. Phineas had absorbed it and taken it with him and I was rid of it forever” (871). This is another example of how the war furthers Gene’s advance into adulthood.

The war is a symbol of how things aren’t always what they seem. Recruiting posters and propaganda advertising the army convince many boys into thinking the war is an exciting adventure in which young men interact. Leper enlists in the army after being impressed by a film shown by a recruiter from the U.S. ski troops. “The ski movie had decided him. ‘I always thought the war would come for me when it wanted me…I never thought I’d be going to it. I’m really glad I saw that movie in time, you bet I am’” (826) Leper is amazed by these men and how they, with their recognizable and friendly faces, give a clean response to war. However, he has a breakdown of emotions after joining the troops. He becomes psychotic, goes AWOL, and is given a Section Eight. The war proves too much for such an innocent, isolated boy. He is unprepared for the gory, gruesome things he sees when he arrives for training, and the change is unbearable for Leper who is used to the traditions at home and at Devon. Gene knows that Leper went through more than he could handle, and comments “For if Leper was psycho it was the army which had done it to him, and I and all of us were on the brink of the army…A Section Eight discharge is for the nuts in the service, the psychos, the Funny Farm candidates” (837). Leper sends Gene a telegram as his call for help. This symbolizes how everyone needs a friend to assist them when they are in trouble. Gene does not even realize how important he is to Leper until this point.

The war affects the students and faculty at Devon because bit by bit it begins to intrude on their lives. “The war is presented first as a distant source of uneasiness, but its presence gradually grows into an emblem of the encroachment of the adult world’s most mundane elements onto an unspoiled realm of youth and beauty” (Beacham’s Guide to Literature for Young Adults, 1186). At first, the boys hardly notice that the war is taking place. Finny even convinces his friends that the war is an illusion created by old men who want to participate in fighting for their country but aren’t young enough. The Devon Academy finally opens its eyes to the war when Leper enlists. His friends begin to pay attention to the news hoping that their classmate is involved in the heroic deeds they hear about. Gene jokes a few times during the course of the novel about enlisting with Brinker. These teenagers do not take the war seriously, and this causes a shock when Leper, the first boy to enlist from Devon, becomes a “nervous in the service.” This is the first time that the war hits home. From this point on, the effects of the war take a toll on the lives of the students. The war finally brings Devon into reality when soldiers with their equipment begin to invade the campus. At the end of the novel before Gene enlists, he remembers, “—early in June I stood at the window and watched the war moving in to occupy it” (Knowles, 866) Gene, Finny, and all the students put off the war until the final possible moment when they have no choice but to become implicated.

Phineas and Gene are often considered to be symbols of the two sides of the human personality-good and evil. Phineas becomes a symbol of the ideal person. He is kind, considerate, compassionate, and an excellent friend to Gene. He is a leader, and is confident in himself and in his friends. Gene, on the other hand, is a follower. He appears to be an admirable person, but deep down inside can be evil and vindictive from all the anger that has built up. Gene is a symbol of the “fallen man”. Throughout the novel, the question that the reader continually ponders is whether or not Gene deliberately shook the tree limb so that Finny would fall. Gene subconsciously was jealous of Finny’s success as an athlete at Devon, which probably motivated him in wanting to hurt Finny. Finny is uncertain if Gene intentionally shook the tree, and therefore never accuses him. Leper calls Gene a “savage” and he denies it, but soon after proves him right. Leper accuses Gene of knocking Finny out of the tree, and Gene automatically goes on the defensive. He becomes enraged because he already is feeling guilty about the incident. While visiting Leper, Gene says, “I shoved my foot against the rung of his chair and kicked. Leper went over in his chair and collapsed against the floor. Laughing and crying he lay with his head on the floor and his knees up. ‘…always were a savage underneath” (838).

In conclusion, the numerous symbols in the novel illustrate the persistent themes of A Separate Peace. The friendship between Gene and Phineas is amidst themes such as lack of reality, low maturity levels, and false appearances. Their relationship deteriorates and leads to death because they fail to learn these valuable life lessons. The purpose of Knowles’ novel is to exaggerate the life of two young boys to the extreme in order to reveal the unfortunate things that can occur in a relationship when these themes are not taken seriously. As stated in Magill’s Survey of American Literature, “It (A Separate Peace) can be viewed, for example, as a tale of Original Sin, with the Devon School as an Eden enclosing the great Tree of Knowledge through which humankind falls far from innocence but is redeemed by the suffering of a totally innocent one. It may also be approached as a reworking of the classic tale of the need to accept the potential evil within everyone and thus make peace with one’s self.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY”A Separate Peace.” Magill’s Survey of American Literature, Vol. 3. New York: Marshall Cavendish Corp., 1993.

Beacham’s Guide to Literature for Young Adults, Vol. 3, pages 1186- 1192.

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