

A Separate Peace

FULL TITLE · *A Separate Peace*

AUTHOR · John Knowles

TYPE OF WORK · Novel

GENRE · Coming-of-age story; tragedy

LANGUAGE · English

TIME AND PLACE WRITTEN · New England, 1957–58

DATE OF FIRST PUBLICATION · 1959

As you're reading, **take note of the following:**

- 📌 NARRATOR
- 📌 POINT OF VIEW
- 📌 TONE
- 📌 SETTING - TIME & PLACE
- 📌 PROTAGONIST
- 📌 MAJOR CONFLICT
- 📌 RISING ACTION
- 📌 CLIMAX
- 📌 FALLING ACTION
- 📌 THEMES
- 📌 FORESHADOWING

Your test will be multiple choice, true/false and essay format. The questions will be regarding all of the preceding.

Test Study Guide:

Know these key facts:

FULL TITLE · *A Separate Peace*

AUTHOR · John Knowles

TIME AND PLACE WRITTEN · New England, 1957–58

DATE OF FIRST PUBLICATION · 1959

NARRATOR · Gene Forrester narrates the story as he revisits his high school campus and recalls events that happened fifteen years earlier.

POINT OF VIEW · The narrator speaks in the **first person**, describing events as he perceived them at the time of their occurrence, though occasionally with the augmented knowledge of hindsight (sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between the perspective of the younger Gene and the older Gene). Although he apparently recounts external events with honesty and thoroughness, Gene is an unreliable narrator in that he withholds his own thoughts and emotions regarding certain crucial scenes, such as Finny's fall and the boys' makeshift trial of Gene.

TONE · Occasionally nostalgic but largely brooding and melancholy; often regretful

TENSE · **Past tense**; the narrator refers to the recent past (“not long ago”) before launching into a flashback on the more remote past of fifteen years earlier. The book then ends with a return to the recent past.

SETTING (TIME) · The story begins in 1958 but quickly flashes back to the years 1942–43

SETTING (PLACE) · The Devon School, an exclusive New England academy

PROTAGONIST · Gene

MAJOR CONFLICT · Gene feels both love and hate for his best friend, Finny, worshipping and resenting Finny’s athletic and moral superiorities.

RISING ACTION · Gene’s envy of Finny grows; Gene realizes that Finny doesn’t return his resentment; Gene becomes jealous of Finny’s seeming incapacity to be envious; Gene feels that Finny is a morally superior person; Finny suggests that the boys climb a tree together.

CLIMAX · Gene jounces the limb of the tree, making Finny fall and shatter his leg

FALLING ACTION · Gene feels guilty about Finny’s fall; he and Finny become even more intimate, developing a codependency; the boys put Gene on “trial” for the accident; Finny falls down the stairs and breaks his leg again; Finny dies during the operation on his leg.

THEMES · Codependency’s threat to identity; the creation of inner enemies

SYMBOLS · World War II; the summer and winter sessions at Devon; Finny’s fall

FORESHADOWING · Prior to his flashback, the older Gene makes reference to a “death by violence” and to fears that he had at school, which are associated with a flight of marble steps and a tree. These remarks foreshadow Gene’s revelation of Finny’s two accidents: the falling from the tree and the falling down the steps.

Additionally Know:

Plot

Major and Minor Characters

Possible Essay Questions:

1. To what extent should we consider Gene to be an unreliable narrator? How does this concern affect our understanding of the story that he tells and our attitude toward him?
2. Discuss the relationship between codependency and identity in *A Separate Peace* and how these concepts help define the relationship between Gene and Finny.
3. How does World War II function in the novel on a symbolic and thematic level? How does it relate to the title of the book?
4. Contrast Brinker and Finny. How do their personalities relate to the winter session and summer session, respectively?
5. Discuss the symbolism of Finny’s fall. Is *A Separate Peace* a novel of sin and redemption? Is Gene redeemed in the end?
6. Analyze the role of competition in the relationship between Gene and Finny. How does Finny’s invented game of “blitzball” work as a symbol of Finny’s approach to competition? Why is it significant that he excels at sports while Gene shines in academics?