Steppenwolf for Young Adults presents

John Knowles’

A Separate Peace

adapted by Nancy Gilsenan    directed by Jonathan Berry

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Study Guide
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At the beginning of *A Separate Peace*, Gene, Finny and their fellow classmates live in a world of neatly defined boundaries. The difference between right and wrong, between friends and enemies, between truth and falsehood, is clear and absolute. As the summer kicks off with the creation of Finny’s Suicide Society, Devon school is still a place wherein rules are followed, traditions are honored and a social hierarchy is maintained.

However, as the summer marches on, this clear-cut world inside Devon School unravels. Previously held truisms prove difficult to hold onto as the boys confront the complexities of war, betrayal and growing up. As the play progresses, Gene and Finny start to see their world not in black and white but in shades of gray. Nothing is as simple as it was before; even the definitions of friendship and loyalty begin to blur as summer turns into fall.

This study guide will delve into three core themes in *A Separate Peace*:

**F R I E N D S H I P**

What does it really mean to be “friends?” Can two people be friends in the face of jealousy and rivalry? How do the power dynamics of a group influence friendship? And what becomes of a friendship after a severe betrayal?

**B E L I E F**

What does it mean when we choose to believe? And what happens if that belief directly conflicts with reality? In what ways does a willingness to believe ultimately serve us or let us down?

**H O N O R**

What role does honor and duty play in the story? How does the war fuel a sense of purpose for these characters?
FINNY Played by Damir Konjicija

Finny is a natural leader; a great athlete with a charming, magnetic personality that both impresses and overwhelms his peers. He thrives on testing limits—whether that means wearing a pink shirt to the Headmaster’s tea, inventing a new sport or jumping out of the Devon tree before his senior year. However after his accident, when Finny can no longer play sports or participate in the war effort, he struggles to redefine himself and the world around him.

WHAT DO OTHER CHARACTERS SAY ABOUT FINNY?

“You always get away with everything.” - Gene

“None of the regular things matter to you. You care about all the wrong stuff.” - Gene

“That’s because you always win, Finny. It’s like eating: you sit down to a meal and eat; you play any game and you win.” - Leper

“You run, jump, you charm people, and you never think about it. Life for you just happens.” - Gene

GENE Played by Jake Cohen

Gene is Finny’s best friend. He is a strong student and well-liked by his peers, but he does not consider himself a leader. He is far more hesitant than Finny to break the rules and take risks, and oscillates between adoration and envy for his free-spirited best friend. Gene’s act of aggression against Finny in the middle of the play is indicative of his own insecurities – he does not feel comfortable in his own skin, and is thrown by his best friend’s effortless approach to the world.

WHAT DO OTHER CHARACTERS SAY ABOUT GENE?

“I could study forever and I would never do better than C’s. But it’s different with you. You’re good.” - Finny

“You have a tendency to back away from things if I don’t give you a little shove.” - Finny

WHAT DOES GENE SAY ABOUT HIMSELF?

“I’m not like you Finny. I’m not as good as you are.”

“Why me? For a friend, I mean. I’m not terrific at sports. I can’t get away with anything. Why did you choose me?”

LEPER Played by Will Allan

Leper is a gentle, unassuming boy who desperately wants to be included by his peers. He loves skiing and is a naturally peaceful person with little interest in the war effort aside from a fear of being drafted. He enlists in the army after seeing a video about the ski troops, but later struggles to keep his sanity during the intensive training. Leper is also the sole witness to Finny’s accident, and finds that the information he holds about Gene puts him in a unique position of power for the first time.

WHAT DOES LEPER SAY ABOUT HIMSELF?

“I just want to be left alone.”

“Don’t we have better things to do than shoot each other?”

“You always did take me for a fool, didn’t you?” (To Brinker)

“You never realized it, but I’m important too.”
**A QUESTION OF CHARACTER: SPOTLIGHT ON FINNY**

1. Before his injury, do you think Finny is completely secure with himself? Why or why not?

2. Why do you think it did not matter to Finny if anyone besides Gene saw him break the swimming record?

3. Why do you think Finny creates the Suicide Society in the first place? Why do you think it is so important that the other boys jump out of tree along with him?
John Knowles was born in Fairmont, West Virginia in September 1926. Though his family settled away from New England due to his father’s job in the coal industry, both of his parents originally hailed from Massachusetts. “New England, to them, was the place to go if you wanted an education,” Knowles wrote later. Though he was originally expected to follow his older brother to Mercersberg Academy in Pennsylvania, Knowles spotted a catalog for Exeter Academy lying around his house, and filled out the attached application without telling his parents. “Soon, entrance examinations were arranged for me at the local high school, administered by the principal no less. Exeter was clearly an important place.”

Knowles had never seen the school before arriving in the fall of 1942 at the age of 15 and at first it seemed he might flunk out. His high school in West Virginia had not adequately prepared him for Exeter’s high academic standards, and he failed his first marking period in both math and physics. “Then somehow or other I knuckled down, learned by myself how to study, and discovered I had a brain which had more potential than a knack for writing,” Knowles said later.

Knowles attended a summer session at Exeter in 1943, a formative experience that would later serve as his inspiration for A Separate Peace. “Everything fit. The only elements in A Separate Peace which were not in that summer were anger, envy, violence, and hatred. There was only friendship, athleticism, and loyalty.”

After graduating from Exeter, Knowles spent eight months as a pilot in the Army Air Corps and then enrolled in Yale University, class of 1949. After his college graduation he got a job as editor/drama critic for The Hartford Courant, and later took an editorship at Holiday, a travel magazine. Not entirely satisfied with his life as a journalist, Knowles began to write fiction, encouraged by his friend and fellow Yale alumnus
John Knowles achieved fast success with his first novel, *A Separate Peace*. Soon after its publication in 1960, the book received the William Faulkner Foundation Award and the Rosenthal Award of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. It won a place in the American literary canon, next to classic novels such as J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*. It has sold over eight million copies to date, and, in 1972, was turned into a film by Paramount Pictures. As described by one of its publishers, Scribner Book Company, “*A Separate Peace* looms over the American literary imagination as both beacon and sentinel, enticing as many emulators by its extraordinary success as it discourages by the sheer magnificence of John Knowles’ accomplishment.” *A Separate Peace* is currently on many high schools’ required reading lists, and has been since it was first published. In the words of the author, “Eschewing false modesty, [A Separate Peace] made me quite famous and financially secure.”

Thornton Wilder. Wilder urged Knowles to write about his most vivid memories, prompting Knowles to start work on *A Separate Peace*. He worked on the book throughout the late 1950s, while he was editing at *Holiday*.

After the publication and commercial success of *A Separate Peace* in 1960, Knowles was able to quit his job at *Holiday* and become a full-time novelist. None of his later books however, matched the success of that first novel. At the time of his death at age 75, Knowles had written over a dozen books, including a sequel to *A Separate Peace* entitled *Peace Breaks Out*.

Knowles once told an interviewer that he did not mind having his reputation rest on a single book. “It’s paid the bills for 30 years,” he said. “It has made my career possible. Unlike most writers, I don’t have to do anything else to make a living.”

**THE SUCCESS OF A NOVEL**

*A Separate Peace Becomes a Classic*
Prep schools have a long history in the United States, particularly in New England (Vermont, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Massachusetts and Connecticut), where the most prestigious prep schools still thrive. Originally created to educate wealthy children of New England families in preparation for their matriculation into the Ivy League, most prep schools today offer extensive financial aid in order to accommodate all qualified applicants. Acceptance to these institutions is still very competitive; students must complete an application process very similar to that of college admission and maintain high academic standing while enrolled.

Prep schools then and now are defined by their academic rigor, breadth of extra-curricular opportunities and dormitory-style living. They also have financial endowments that often rival major universities, allowing for advanced facilities and a low student to teacher ratio. Though no longer “feeder” schools into the Ivy League, most New England prep school graduates do attend the country’s top universities.
THE INSPIRATION FOR DEVON SCHOOL: Phillips Exeter Academy

“Exeter was, I suspect, more crucial in my life than in the lives of most members of my class, and conceivably, than in the lives of almost anyone else who attended the school. It picked me up out of the hills of West Virginia, forced me to learn to study, tossed me into Yale, and few years later inspired me to write a book, my novel A Separate Peace.” - John Knowles

John Knowles, author of A Separate Peace, attended Phillips Exeter Academy, a prep school in New Hampshire, from 1942-1945. The school was established in 1781 with the goal of educating young men within a Calvinist religious framework. Exeter did not accept female students until 1970, though now the student body is comprised of 50 percent women. The school was originally intended to be a Harvard feeder school, though today Exeter students attend a wide range of colleges after graduation.

Exeter still ranks among the top New England preparatory schools, boasting a long lineage of notable alumni from U.S. Senator Daniel Webster to 14th U.S. President Franklin Pierce. John Knowles actually attended Exeter with famed writer and political activist Gore Vidal, on whom Knowles later based the character Brinker in A Separate Peace. Knowles is not the only author to use Exeter as a setting for a successful novel – fellow writer John Irving also used the school as inspiration for his novels, The World According to Garp and A Prayer for Owen Meany.

Modern entrepreneur Mark Zuckerberg (the founder of Facebook) also attended Exeter, as did Dan Brown, author of the popular novel, The Da Vinci Code.

DID YOU KNOW?

Exeter Academy and its archrival Phillips Andover Academy have played an annual football against each other since 1878. The rivalry is based on the fact that Phillips was previously a feeder school to Yale University, while Exeter was a feeder school to Harvard.

QUESTIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

PRESSURE VERSUS EXPECTATION: THE PARADOX OF PRESTIGE

A school like Exeter, which is steeped deeply in a tradition of excellence, can be both an inspiring and stressful place to get an education. How do you think Exeter’s history affects its student body? What do you see as the pros and cons of attending a school with history like Exeter?

LIVING AT SCHOOL VERSUS LIVING AT HOME: THE QUESTION OF BOARDING SCHOOL

At most high schools, students return home to their families at the end of a long school day. But in A Separate Peace, the boys never get a break from each other – they study together, eat together and sleep in the same dormitory. While a strong bond forms between students in this type of educational environment, the intensity is also palpable. What do you see as the pros and cons of a boarding school education?
In *A Separate Peace*, the boys are constantly preparing themselves to join the war effort. Conversations about the draft permeate the dormitory, as the boys discuss the pros and cons of voluntarily joining the army versus waiting to be drafted.

**How did the WWII Draft work?**

In 1939, the United States Army had less than 200,000 men in uniform that could be sent overseas with proper training. Though men could voluntarily join the army at the age of seventeen, Congress realized they could not rely on volunteers alone to build a competitive army. The war was being fought on both the Asian and European fronts, and the United States needed hundreds of thousands of soldiers to join the effort.

In September of 1940, President Roosevelt signed *The Selective Training and Service Act*, the first peacetime draft in the history of the country. The law required all men ages 21-35 to hand over their personal information to local draft boards, thereby submitting themselves to the national draft lottery. By the time Finny and Gene would have been seniors at Exeter (1943), that age bracket had expanded to men ages 18-45.

6,443 draft boards were established around the country after President Roosevelt’s announcement. Families waited with bated breath for Secretary of War Henry Stimson to reach into the lottery “war bowl” and pick out a capsule that would contain a single slip of paper with a number 1 through 7,836 printed on it. The first number was drawn on October 29th, 1940. The capsule contained the number 158 – a draft number held by 6,175 young men across the country. These were the first men to be drafted into WWII.

By the war’s end, over 35 million men had registered with the U.S. Army, 10 million of whom were drafted.

“We’re seventeen. We can enlist whenever we want. Why wait until eighteen, when you can’t even make the choice?” - Brinker
“Returning to Exeter for the fall term of 1943, I found that a charged, driven time had come to the school. I remember how virtually all the young masters disappeared one by one, and old men became our only teachers.” - John Knowles

**EXETER DURING WWII**

**A Changed Place**

“The Faculty of the Phillips Exeter Academy offers to the town of Exeter, the State of New Hampshire and to the Nation whatever service it may able to render.”

Taken from the Exeter Bulletin, 1943

Recognizing that many of their students could be drafted before the end of their senior years, the faculty at Exeter tweaked the academic curriculum so students could graduate before going off to war. The school began to offer core classes during the summer session and reduced the number of required courses from 17 to 16. The priority in 1943 was the war effort, and Exeter knew that academics had to come second to the nation’s demand for soldiers.

The entire tenor of school life changed during those years, a feeling that Knowles truly captures in A Separate Peace. The war effort was everywhere, affecting everything from athletic competition to academics. “There was apple-harvesting ‘for the war,’ railroad clearance ‘for the war,’ numerous collection drives ‘for the war’ and all those patriotic movies in the gym with Spencer Tracy or Van Johnson or someone heroically bombing Tokyo,” says Knowles.

The most important developments made in the past year are as follows:

1. Over 800 graduates have reported to service, and that list is far from complete.
2. 20 members of the staff have entered government service – either military, naval or scientific.
3. The Academy curriculum was revised to permit more flexibility of choice.
4. American History was made a required subject.
5. Classes in First Aid were conducted by the Athletic Department.
6. Fraternities were abolished.

Taken from the Exeter Bulletin, 1942
WHY IS GENE AFRAID OF FINNY?

JEALOUSY

Moments before the incident, Gene admits to being jealous of his friend’s athletic ability and leadership skills. Though Finny insists the feeling isn’t mutual, Gene cannot understand how his friend doesn’t feel the same way, “You’re really not jealous of my grades, are you?” Gene asks Finny on the tree branch. “Why should I be jealous?” Finny answers. Finny’s altruism actually makes Gene feel worse, and he suddenly feels guilty for indulging his own jealous feelings. “I’m not like you Finny,” Gene confesses, “I’m not as good as you are.” Gene feels insecure and inadequate next to his friend, who seems to be above normal feelings of rivalry and envy.

CONFUSION

Gene has a hard time understanding his friend’s unusual approach to the world. What Finny deems important always confounds Gene, who has a far more black-and-white approach to life. “None of the regular things matter to you,” Gene says, “You care about all the wrong stuff.” Gene’s inability to understand his friend’s worldview creates a chasm between them. In the words of director Jonathan Berry, Gene’s decision to jostle the tree branch is his, “attempt to destroy the one thing he does not understand.”
MISTRUST

Midway through the play, Gene becomes convinced that Finny does not have his best interests at heart. "You don’t want me to get all A’s while you win all the trophies," Gene says to Finny, “You want me to fail my trig test.” Gene begins to see Finny as a person who is subversively trying to sabotage the thing he’s good at: academics. After Gene starts questioning his friend’s good intentions, Finny automatically becomes the enemy, and this loss of trust sets their once-strong friendship on shaky ground.

EXERCISES FOR THE CLASSROOM

TAKE A LOOK AT GENE AND FINNY’S CONTRASTING QUALITIES:

GenE
- Studious
- Follows rules
- Part of the group
- Soft-spoken
- Realist
- Pragmatist

FinnY
- Athletic
- Tests the limits
- Leader of the group
- Extroverted
- Idealist
- Optimist

Why do you think Gene chose Finny as a best friend?
Why has Finny chosen Gene?

CONNECTING TO THE PLAY

1. Do you have a friend of whom you are jealous? Do you think that friendship can survive in the face of jealousy?

2. Think of a person in your life with a unique worldview. What do you admire about their approach to life? What do you find hard to understand?

3. Have you ever been wrong about a friend’s intentions and acted on it? If so, how did you go about fixing that mistake?
DID YOU KNOW?

Aristotle, an ancient Greek philosopher and student of Plato, wrote about three types of friendship:

**Friendship based on utility**
Each person gets something they need from the other.

**Friendship based on pleasure**
Each person enjoys spending time with the other.

**Friendship based on goodness**
According to Aristotle, this is the highest form of friendship. Each person loves the other not because they provide utility or pleasure, but for who they are.

CONSIDER... What type of friendship do you think Finny and Gene are engaged in?

RECONCILING THE BETRAYAL: GENE’S DECISION TO JOSTLE THE TREE BRANCH

Though not premeditated, Gene does make a conscious decision to jostle the branch on which Finny is standing. It’s an impulse that he later regrets, but the fact remains that his action sets off a chain of events that later results in Finny’s death.

“It was something inside.” Gene explains, “Something crazy, something blind. I didn’t mean it.”

While a black-and-white system of morality might deem Gene’s action definitively wrong, John Knowles weaves a story through which we can understand and empathize with Gene’s impulse against his friend. It’s certainly not a morally sound choice, but Knowles makes it possible for us to see the humanity in Gene’s action.

QUESTIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

1. Do you believe Gene when he says he “didn’t mean it?”

2. Do you think it matters if Gene’s decision to jostle the branch was premeditated or not?

3. Do you think a friendship can recover from a betrayal of this magnitude?
AFTER THE INCIDENT: A CHANGED FRIENDSHIP

After the incident, the dynamics of Finny and Gene’s friendship are deeply changed. Finny no longer has the ability to excel at sports or participate in the war effort, and for the first time he shows his insecurities and vulnerability. In turn Gene has a renewed sense of loyalty and commitment to his friend, because he knows the role he played in Finny’s injury. The power structure of their friendship changes completely, and the boys need to readjust to the new and tenuous dynamics.

QUESTIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

1. What does Finny need from Gene at the start of the play? And how does that change after his injury?

2. Do you think the obstacles of jealousy, confusion and mistrust remain after Finny breaks his leg? What are the new obstacles to their friendship?

THE GENDER QUESTION: THE COMPLEXITY OF MALE FRIENDSHIP

Gene is taken aback when Finny openly refers to him as his best pal, “I never heard anybody say that before – about somebody else,” Gene says. “Out loud, I mean.”

CONSIDER... Do you think boys are less likely than girls to speak openly about their friendship? If so, why do you think that is?
Belief: Acceptance of truth of something: acceptance by the mind that something is true or real, often underpinned by an emotional or spiritual sense of certainty.
- Merriam-Webster Dictionary

**GENE AND FINNY: TWO DIFFERENT SYSTEMS OF BELIEF**

Gene: “Do you ever stop?”
Finny: “Stop what?”
Gene: “Whatever it is you do. This believing in anything; anything you want to believe. When do you stop?”
Finny: “Why? Why should I stop?”

Where is the line between a belief that serves us and a belief that lets us down? At the beginning of the play, Finny is a staunch optimist— he always sees the best in everyone, and believes that anything is possible. However after his injury, Finny’s optimistic worldview morphs into fierce denial. Instead of working through the pain and the realities of this new life, he crafts his own reality.

**CONSIDER...** At what point in the story does Finny’s willingness to believe whatever he wants to believe become harmful? At what points during the play does it serve him?

**AFTER THE INJURY: FINNY’S SYSTEM OF BELIEF BREAKS DOWN**

**DENYING THE WAR**

When he returns to Devon, Finny tries to convince Gene and the rest of the boys that the war is a fabrication. “Don’t be a sap,” he says to Gene, “There isn’t any war... The whole world is a funny farm now. But it’s only fat old men who get the joke.” Finny chooses to believe this elaborate conspiracy theory and uses it as a defense mechanism: if he cannot participate in the war effort, the war needs to not exist.

**THE FALLOUT** In the final pages of the play, Finny confesses to Gene that he’s personally written to the Navy, Army and the Marines, begging to be admitted to the Armed Forces despite his condition. While denying the war may have worked as a temporary defense mechanism, Finny must eventually confront the truth. “There is a war on,” Finny says to Gene at the end of the play, “And I don’t know if I can take this with a war on.”
REFUSING TO ACCEPT GENE’S ROLE IN HIS INJURY

Even after Gene tells Finny the truth about that day on the tree limb, Finny chooses not to believe him. “You didn’t let them put someone else in the room with you. That’s what counts,” Finny says just moments after Gene confesses to jostling the tree limb. Instead of confronting the difficult information Gene has just shared, Finny chooses to believe his own reality. Following Finny’s lead, Gene retracts his confession and denies any wrongdoing. By agreeing to ignore the ugly facts of the incident the boys can remain best friends, and Finny can still live in a world in which his best friend would never do wrong by him.

THE FALLOUT After Finny injures his leg a second time, his repressed anger against Gene bubbles to the surface. “You want to break something else in me? Is that what you want?” he yells when Gene visits him in the hospital. Though Finny tried to hold fast to his belief that Gene would never hurt him, the truth is ultimately stronger than this conviction.

TRAINING GENE FOR THE OLYMPICS

After his injury, Finny channels all his energy into training Gene for the ‘44 Olympics. Even though Gene insists he is not a good athlete, Finny chooses to believe that his friend has real athletic potential. Instead of confronting the loss of his own athletic ability, Finny presses his friend to succeed in his place. “We’re going to make you good. Better. The best ever,” Finny tells Gene on the first day of the new semester. And even though Gene doubts himself (and doubts there will even be a ‘44 Olympics), he eventually agrees to follow his friend’s training regimen.

THE FALLOUT While training Gene for the Olympics gives Finny a purpose for a short while, the task ultimately proves futile. No amount of steadfast belief will catapult Gene to the ‘44 Olympics; particularly given the ‘44 Olympics are canceled due to the war. And as it turns out, training his friend is not the same as participating himself — and eventually Finny is forced to confront the loss of his own mobility.

QUESTIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

1. Why do you think the other boys at Devon buy into Finny’s various denials? What do they gain from believing in him?

2. At the start of the play, do you think Finny is served by his willingness to believe that anything is possible? Or do you think his system of beliefs sets him up for a steeper fall?

CONNECTING TO THE PLAY

How do you deal with life’s challenges? Can you think of a time when you employed Finny’s method of denial? How about Gene’s method of confrontation?
For the boys at Devon School, everything is heightened in the summer of 1942. They are all acutely aware of their impending birthdays, which will push them into the draft and overseas. The prospect of going to war looms over everything from athletics to academics, and gives even the simplest activities extra weight.

Each boy in the group has a different approach to dealing with the war: some, like Finny, embrace the prospect of being drafted, while others ignore the possibility in favor of focusing on schoolwork. In spite of their individual coping strategies, the war and its expectations pervade the campus. These daily stressors force the boys to prove their bravery and masculinity on a daily basis, and constantly establish their place in the war.

As they confront new societal expectations of honor, duty and patriotism, the boys must grapple with what it means to be a man in the 1940s, and the potential risks and glory of going to war.

**QUESTIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM**

1. Do you think that the quest for honor in wartime is still an inherently male experience? Or has that changed with the advent of female soldiers?

2. Can you think of anything else besides war that elicits a similar feeling of honor and duty from its participants?

**WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO JUMP OUT OF THE TREE?**

“Here’s my contribution to the war effort!” Finny shouts when he jumps out of the tree in the play’s opening scene. This jump isn’t just for fun; it’s a right of passage and a show of bravery. When Finny completes his jump and turns his attention to Gene, he uses the war to convince his friend to jump. “When they torpedo the troopship, you can’t stand around admiring the view. Jump!” Finny shouts. Gene can’t argue with this logic, so he does as his friend says.

When Finny later speaks to his headmaster, he draws a clear connection between the jump and the war effort, “We had to do it because, naturally, we’re getting ready for the war. What if they lower the draft age to seventeen?” Finny’s explanation touches a chord with Headmaster Prud’homme, and he lets the boys off without punishment. It’s clear that even the Devon staff is committed to the idea of bravery and honor in wartime, even if it means breaking the school rules. By employing the war effort to justify his actions, Finny gets off scot-free.
When Leper first decides to go off and join the army, the boys fixate on the possibility that he might become a war hero, “Hey, maybe he’ll turn into a hero, huh?” Gene muses, “Maybe ole Leper will be the one to turn the tide. I can see it now: ‘Leper Liberates Tunisia!’” There is nothing more honorable for these boys than the possibility of being a war hero, and now their friend has the opportunity to become just that.

But when Leper escapes from the army after almost losing his mind in basic training, the boys are rattled by his dishonorable decision. “What do you mean you escaped, Leper?” Gene asks, “People don’t escape from the Army.” Leper also understands the weight of his action, and is deeply ashamed by it. “They were going to give me a Section VIII, Gene,” he says, “A discharge. For nuts. In the service. You know what that means? I’d be screwed for life!”

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**QUESTIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM**

1. Do you think Finny feels ready for war? What about Gene? Do you sense more excitement or trepidation from the boys when it comes to joining the war effort?

2. Do you think Finny really jumps out of the tree to prepare for war? Or is there something else at play here?

3. Why do you think the other boys can walk away from Finny’s challenge to jump out of the tree? Why couldn’t Gene do the same?

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**CONNECTING TO THE PLAY**

1. Can you think of something that collectively galvanized you and your friends? What did that sense of shared purpose feel like?

2. Can you think of a time when peer pressure forced you to make a choice you never would have made on your own?

3. We are currently engaged in two different wars: one in Iraq and one in Afghanistan. How does the way Finny and Gene speak about WWII differ from conversations about war today?

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**LEPER: A DISHONORABLE DISCHARGE**
Leper’s surprise arrival pops the idealistic bubble Finny has built for his friends. With Leper’s appearance, the harsh reality of war comes storming into their winter games. Additionally, the shameful nature of his escape is so at odds with what the boys have been taught about wartime honor that Gene and the rest of the boys retreat from their friend - as if Leper has a disease they do not want to catch. “I don’t care Leper. Really. I don’t give a damn,” says Gene, “This has absolutely nothing to do with me.”

EXERCISES FOR THE CLASSROOM

ANALYZING A SCENE

Shortly after Leper appears at the winter decathlon, a lot of important information regarding Finny’s “accident” is rapidly revealed. Take a close look at this scene to figure out why these important plot points are exposed during this particular moment.

1. Why do you think Leper exposes Gene’s role in Finny’s accident during this scene? What does he have to gain from revealing this information?

2. Why do you think Brinker takes such an active interest in accusing Gene during this scene? What does he have to gain if Gene is guilty?

3. Why do you think Finny doesn’t want Leper to talk about the accident? What does he have to lose if this information is revealed?

FINNY: EXCLUDED FROM THE HONOR OF WAR

After Finny breaks his leg, he begins to pretend the war does not exist. While Gene and the other boys go along with his charade for a few months, Finny breaks down in the play’s final moments and confesses that he just couldn’t stand the thought of being excluded from something so momentous. “I’ll hate it everywhere if I’m not in this war!” he tells Gene. “I want to be part of it.”

The possibility of becoming a war hero is taken from Finny the moment he falls out of the tree. Suddenly, all of the war’s honor and glory will be garnered by other brave soldiers (perhaps his own friends), while he is made to stay at home and watch from a distance. This loss is profound for Finny, as he truly believed in the inherent honor of fighting a foreign enemy.
Have you ever been excluded from something to which you desperately wanted to belong? How did you cope with the loss?
Whitney Dibo: What was your first interaction with *A Separate Peace*? Did you read the book in high school?

Jonathan Berry: Actually, no. Steppenwolf’s Hallie Gordon asked me to read the play when she first began considering it for the Steppenwolf for Young Adults season. She gave me the adaptation first, then the novel. And I think it was good to read the play first because I didn’t come to it with an idea of how it could or should be adapted.

WD: How do you think this play is guided by the age of the characters?

JB: So much of childhood is about having a black-and-white divide of the world; our younger minds really have trouble detecting shades of gray. And this story is really about a young man discovering those shades of gray. You know, when men in particular are growing up they’re taught to deal with adversity in this very direct, confrontational way. That’s bred into you as a young man.

WD: Do you think Gene and Finny approach each other with this black-and-white worldview?

JB: One of the things that makes Finny so unique is that he doesn't see enemies. He sees Gene and thinks, “This is my best friend and I love him.” Whereas Gene has a sense of competition and rivalry – and once he starts seeing Finny as a rival, he can only see Finny that way. These two characters are experiencing the same friendship very differently.

WD: What effect does the war have on this story?

JB: Our reasons for entering World War II were very clear. The whole endeavor was easily couched as a struggle of “good versus evil.” For these boys, that idea hangs like a cloud over the entire play. Its presence creates pressure for them – everything is heightened because there’s a war on. Plus, joining the Army was presented as a valid option; you could leave school and fight the good fight, and it was brave and right and true to do so.
WD: And what do you think that does to Finny, when he can no longer be part of that effort?

JB: I think there is a real difference in Finny before and after the accident. Before the accident, he knows who he is in a very extraordinary way for a sixteen-year-old boy. He sees himself as existing to fight in this war. Then after the accident, the person Finny was sure he would be gets taken away from him. He has to cope with a new reality.

WD: How are you going to maintain empathy for Gene when on paper, what he does to Finny is so wrong?

JB: For me, it's not that black-and-white. When Gene takes that action, he has such certainty that Finny is his enemy and trying to bring him down. And then, after he does what he does, that certainty is wrenched away and he is suddenly left with deep, personal shame for doing such a terrible thing to his best friend. I think his action comes from a place of confusion — it was not premeditated. And that's also why Finny has such a hard time understanding how Gene could have done this to him.

WD: Can you talk about the other characters in the play? What purposes do you think they serve?

JB: Leper is such an important character — we all know who that person was in our high school experience. He wants so desperately to belong, to be a part of the group. When he sees that film about the Army ski patrol, he seizes that opportunity to belong to something. But he returns having discovered that as an individual, he could not belong. He did not have the physical or mental hardiness to survive it. And that just tears him apart.

WD: Why is the jump a symbol of bravery? Why do you think Finny picks that challenge to pose to his friends?

JB: The jump makes me think of Native American tribal rites of passages: young men having to go out and hunt or fight, or just do something on their own.

WD: But in this case, the rite of passage is decided not by elders but by peers — which probably heightens its importance.

JB: It ties in with the heroism of the war and the war effort. The jump is a deliberate act of pure bravery for these boys. It's the only thing they have in that moment that translates to men jumping out of helicopters and other war images. The mentality is: we're going to have to do this sooner or later, better that we get ready for it now. The jump is beautiful and noble to Finny. He never really presents it as a way to separate the weak from the strong.

WD: But does it become that?

JB: I think it does, in the minds of the other jumpers.

WD: Do you think this story is ultimately about belonging? Or is it more than that?

JB: This story is a truthful depiction of growing up. That's what ultimately makes it not a book about war or a book about boarding school. It's about discovering the complicated breadth of the world.
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“That’s how we’ll start every meeting of the Super Suicide Society. With a jump from this tree. And we will always go first.”

– Finny

A Separate Peace