

CHARACTER ANALYSES

There are four principal characters in Knowles' *A Separate Peace*, and each of the four becomes involved with the other three in a variety of unusual ways; the four are: Phineas, usually called Finny (no last name), Gene Forrester, Brinker Hadley, and Edwin—"Leper"—Lepellier. Some of the less important characters are Bobby Zane and Chet Douglas, two of the boys frequently present at the various war games; Leper's mother whom we meet briefly when Gene visits Leper; Brinker's father, who visits Devon toward the end of the novel; Mr. Prud'homme, a master during the summer session; Dr. Stanpole, the doctor at Devon and the one who performs the fatal operation on Finny's leg; Cliff Quackenbush, the bully who fights with Gene at the beginning of crew practice. For the most part, the novel concentrates on the quartet of central characters and we can review them as unique individuals.

PHINEAS: It is important to realize that Finny's last name is never presented. Finny is just Finny; he is unique enough to exist without a last name because he is, in every respect, a unique person. Finny is a powerful character and exerts a charismatic charm over the other boys. He has always been Devon School's outstanding athlete. He has not only natural athletic coordination; he has a very strong competitive spirit and the will to win. We can recall his desire to keep secret the fact that he broke the school's swimming record; he was more interested in proving his capability to himself than to the other boys. His ability to excel in sports is of course tragically marred by his "accident," and thus he coaches Gene in the hope that Gene will be able to represent *both* of them in sports.

Finny is the natural leader of the other boys and is responsible for the invention of the various war games and new athletic activities designed to prove manliness such as The Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session and blitzball. It is only because of his scheming that these activities become popular and exciting.

Finny has very definite feelings about the war: to him, the war is the false creation of a bunch of fat old men who stand to prosper when the country is at war. Finny would actually like to be in the war, but after his accident he knows that it is impossible for him to participate. Thus part of his refusal to acknowledge the reality of the war is his defense against being uncomfortable about being unable to be in the war. He writes letters, we should remember, to the Russians and the Chinese, as well as to the various armed services of America, offering his help. To Finny war is really a game, another kind of sport; his confidence in his abilities to be good in war stems from his knowledge that he has always been good in sports.

From a thematic point of view, Finny represents the extreme tragedy of war. He would not have organized the Suicide Society if wartime psychology had not penetrated the atmosphere at Devon; he would not have fallen the first time if the Society had not been started; he would not have been at the trial of Gene if Brinker Hadley had not been filled with a militant

spirit; and he would not have had the second fall and died if he had not been at this trial. In other words, the series of "ifs" which lead tragically to the death of Finny could not have occurred without a wartime psychology, without the newsreels, sermons in chapel, etc., all focusing attention on the war on the outside and the daily bombing missions over Central Europe.

Our view of Finny, then, must be as a tragic hero. He is heroic in the sense that he does not fear war and certainly does not fear death. He is the warrior figure, the powerful athlete destroyed by horrible coincidence and circumstance. He is virtually lionized by the other boys and leads them in a completely natural and unassuming way. He is consistently presented by Knowles, for from beginning to end he remains loyal both to his best friend Gene and to himself.

GENE FORRESTER: Gene is the narrator of the story, a young man returning to the Devon School and recalling his experiences there as a sixteen-year-old student in the summer of 1942 and the following year. He is quite definitely made subordinate to Finny. Gene worships Finny and wants desperately to be his "best friend"; however, occasionally it occurs to Gene that he really envies rather than loves Finny. Gene fears that perhaps unconsciously he wants to become superior to Finny and thus he feels unusually guilty after Finny falls from the tree. From this point on, Gene is plagued by self-doubts and speculates as to the true intentions underlying all his actions. For the most part, however, Gene is able to view himself instinctively as an extension of Finny; he will help Finny in his studies and he will even allow Finny a certain amount of vicarious competitive satisfaction through his training for the imaginary Olympics. Before the accident we see that Gene and Finny are very close for example, they both cajole each other into breaking the rules on the very first day of the summer session.

In all respects, Gene Forrester is secondary to Finny. Gene almost serves as a biographer recalling the greatness of someone else. While Gene allows us certain insights into his own mind he nevertheless directs our attention toward the image of himself as Finny's champion and defender. This image is sharpened dramatically when Gene fights with Cliff Quackenbush who has unknowingly and indirectly insulted the absent, crippled Finny. Gene knows himself well enough to realize that he is merely a part of Finny rather than a completely separate person. Gene's imagination is inferior to that of Finny, although Gene is able to think about life at Devon in a more comprehensive way. This is sensible, for Gene after all is the narrator and Knowles must not let too much attention be directed to him; Finny is the unique character in the novel and Gene is in the book both to tell the story and to magnify Finny's uniqueness.

BRINKER HADLEY: Brinker is the most aggressive boy at Devon. He has long been the leader in extracurricular activities and school politics. He is not in direct competition with anybody else at Devon, for he knows that Gene is a better student and that Finny is the school's best athlete. Brinker's main motivation is to live up to his father's image of him. M

Hadley is a war veteran and therefore filled with the idea that war is an important and patriotic experience which all young men should have.

As the war on the outside spreads, Brinker withdraws into a private world. He begins to stop going to school activities, and he starts wearing khaki-colored clothes and talking like a soldier. He becomes, as it were, Devon's soldier-in-residence. It is vitally important to him to assume the characteristics of an aggressive and brave soldier. And thus he begins to badger the nervous Gene. Brinker's early flirtation with the military image becomes an overpowering aspect of his entire constitution. He becomes aggressive and makes absolutely no effort to hide his hostility. Thus he attacks Gene, forcing him into the trial situation as if it were a trial of a horrible war crime; he says that the country demands an explanation of Finny's casualty and he, Brinker, is going to give the country that explanation. While we easily see Brinker's hostility we do not really understand it until his father arrives at Devon; Knowles might have improved the characterization of Brinker by introducing something of the nature of the relationship between Brinker and his father earlier in the book.

In any case, Brinker never becomes as important a character as either Finny or Gene. Brinker is more of a type than an individual. As a natural debater and politician he brings on disaster when he attacks Gene's vulnerable feelings of self-condemnation.

LEPER LEPELLIER: Leper is the shy, sensitive boy who prefers moody isolation to active participation. He is a "loner" and enjoys going off by himself on walks in the woods where he takes photographs of beaver dams. He is the school naturalist and, being shy, is only able to join with the other boys after careful consideration of external prompting.

Thematically, Leper is the one real link between the boys at Devon and the real war on the outside. He enlists almost impulsively in the Army Ski Patrol in hopes of simply skiing in the woods. But the military training becomes too much for the sensitive Leper and he goes, in his own term, "psycho." Fearing that he will be discharged for psychological reasons, Leper goes A.W.O.L. (absent without leave) and furtively returns to his country home in the Vermont woods. Leper's inability to conform to army life turns him into the boys' first war "casualty" (Finny is the other "casualty"), and represents to them the real horror of war. Until learning of his trouble, the boys had talked about Leper in heroic terms. They imagined that he was responsible in one way or another for every major Allied victory. But when it is disclosed—through his mysterious telegram—that Leper has been defeated by the army experience, the boys can no longer imagine him in an entertaining way. Leper becomes the key symbol of the ugly reality of war; in Chapter Eleven Finny openly confesses to Gene that Leper's accident has opened his eyes; if Leper could crack up as he has, then the war must be real.

Aside from Leper's thematic importance as a link between the boys at Devon and the reality of war, he does not become as well known to us as Finny. We see Leper's outstanding characteristics—his shyness, sensitivity, and his love of nature and solitude—right from the start, and we pity him when he finds his world being turned inside out. But there is little development of Leper between our first and last views of him: true, he becomes psychologically disturbed, but nevertheless we never see into his private feelings.

NAMES: There is possible symbolism in the names of the four major characters but Knowles is not specific. Finny might suggest the French word "finis," meaning finished. That is, Finny is the main war casualty, the one character whose life is ended because of a world saturated with the psychology of war. Gene Forrester's name suggests the magical forests to the north—the imaginary better and more peaceful places that he describes at frequent intervals throughout the book; Brinker Hadley suggests the whole idea of "brinkmanship," of living on the "brink" of war, pushing for further war to the point beyond which would lie disaster (this term, "brinkmanship," was in vogue when the novel was written); and Leper Lepellier can be seen as an undesirable "leper," for after he goes A.W.O.L. he represents something ugly and horrible to the rest of the boys. All of these possible interpretations are purely speculative and are certainly not of major importance. The student should have a firm idea in his mind of each of the four main characters and of the relationships between them; the symbolism of the names is only introduced as an intriguing possibility.