

Brief Notes: *A Separate Peace* Chapters 1-3

Chapter One:

Novel opens with the main character returning to Devon Prep School fifteen years after his graduation. Note the number of times the word fear is used in the opening pages; this comes as a reflection fifteen years later (1957) of events from the summer of 1942 through to the end of the school year (1942/43). That two key parts of the campus draw his attention – the marble hall with stairs that only now he notes for their hardness and the tree down by the water. In particular, Gene Forrester looks for two key places on campus.

But before we go any further, please take note of his names.

The tree represents both literal and figurative meaning – it is linked to the motif of the Tree of Knowledge, to eat of the forbidden fruit, to acquire knowledge, in Gene's case, knowledge of what friendship means, what it means to an enemy, what it means to be oneself.

The tree is the trigger of the flashback and is the impetus of all the action. It is Finny's idea to jump; it is Gene who follows with the other three refusing.

His perspective is different; after all, it is now the late 1950's and the war is over. Thus, the several references to fear in the opening pages are linked more to the war years and the risk of having to serve. Furthermore, there is another deeper source of fear; we could consider it confronting the past, both on the macro (WWII) level and the micro (The dynamics of friendships and rivalries of all boys prep school).

Also think about what returning to an old institution is like for you what changes (it's why Holden does not go into the Museum of Natural History...he is afraid of something difference, whereas Gene is happy to discover that things that once seemed so imposing as old, ordinary, powerless/

Which is why when he looks for place two he is unable to distinguish one tree (overlooking the river) from another. Trees grow and change and remain fixed only in our memories and only if the memory is significant. He looks for The Tree (symbolic) but has trouble at first distinguishing it.

Take note of the pathetic fallacy evident in this scene (it is foggy; rainy; late November) He walks through the fog in search of a tree, and the one key feature that confirms it is the tree, is the limb hanging over the river.

Think about the various expressions about trees; branches; limbs...they will come into play later in the story.

The tree has not held up; he realizes nothing does...

And this leads into the flashback which is the rest of the novel.

It is the summer of 1942; there are only 200 students in school for the summer session; most of the regular staff is serving in the war. Thus, things are not the norm and there is more freedom for these students than it would be.

It is the tree that sparks the flashback and we are now introduced to Finny (short for Phineas; note, the connotation of the name and take note, too, we never learn his last name).

Finny is Gene's roommate and best friend (more so frenemy in Gene's point of view, but that is far more about Gene's insecurity and perspective than Finny's attitude).

Finny is charismatic; a natural leader; athletic; attractive, engaging; honest; open; popular. He is the first to jump from the limb, what he calls his contribution to the war effort.

What Finny starts, Gene follows and so he is the second (and only other one) to jump from the tree in what will be dubbed the Suicide Sessions

Introduced here to some other characters; one to remember is Elwin Lepellier also known as Leper; what does his name connote?

There is a natural tension to the energy/rivalry of the two; Finny is the catalyst and much is offered to Gene by him. It all depends on how Gene perceives this.

Take note in the final paragraphs of chapter one of the bond this jump means and of the music they overhear coming from the dorm: Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree; They're Either Too Old or Too Young; The Warsaw Concerto and The Nutcracker Suite. All connect to key elements of the plot.

Chapter Two:

Finny is a person unto himself: Rules are meant to be broken/bent if they are 'foolish' ones; thus missing dinner is no big deal for Finny as he considers other actions (the jump) more significant:

the tree jumping incident, (devised by him to train for future military service; an act that he enjoys but Gene fears each and every time);

the pink shirt that he has sent from home, a shirt made from a tablecloth; Finny gives

no consideration to the 'rules' of fashion or society; so what if it makes him look like a 'fairy', as Gene says. Finny doesn't care what others think of him as he is confident in his own attitude; Gene would never dare to dress that way; The pink shirt represents Finny's lack of concern as to what others think of him. He views it as an emblem of advances made in Europe; it is, in its twisted way, yet another aspect of Finny's war effort.

the school tie as a belt; the tie is an emblem, representative of tradition, so when he wears it, absentmindedly, as a belt to a formal school function, it seems as if the golden-tongued excuses he always seems to have will not work, but consider two things:

1. How Finny's dynamic personality seems to engage everyone; the tie is part of the school's support for troops in the overseas war;
2. How Gene, Finny's closest friend, looks on with excitement: "This time he wasn't going to get away with it."

Finny meets all situations with a confidence that does not fail to win others over, the exception to this being Gene who both loves and resents the attention Finny attracts. Thus, an unspoken, one-sided resentment builds. He is eager to be considered Finny's equal but lacks the confidence to be so. Thus, he builds upon Finny's ideas, such as the suicide society to call it *The Super* (Finny's adjective) Suicide Society of the Summer Session, but he never presents an idea of his own. Finny sees it as his role to 'waste Gene's time' because Gene is always trying to prove himself – academically and socially – in part because of where he comes from (the South) and how little he feels he fits in with the wealth of Devon, of New England, of 'old money,' all of which Finny represents.

What is clear is Finny's ability to talk himself out of situations, and that they were getting ready for the war. Thus, he can get away with things, in part because the overall rules have slipped as every able man is away at war. Furthermore, the masters who are there are lenient in anticipation of what these boys will face...this is the last summer of innocence, of a much localized peace.

It is accepted by everyone; to an extent it showcases what Gene calls Finny's hypnotic power; note it is something that Gene cannot help but envy. This is evident again at the tea at headmaster's home when Finny is caught wearing the school tie as a belt. Gene watches with pleasure; finally, Finny will get in trouble.

But Finny doesn't. Rather he links the tie to the talk about the bombings and art and the war effort and 'gets away with it.' In part because he thinks aloud and is openly apologetic and charming. Gene basks in the shadow success of his best friend, but... the war is not real; it's a conversation about faraway unimaginable events.

What is real is the tree jumping, but what happens this time is that Gene slip, ahead on the branch of Finny. He loses his footing and if it were not for Finny reaching out (giving a hand to his Friend) Gene would have fallen to the ground below. In essence, Finny saves him.

En route to the river, Gene notes the Devon Woods; again consider them in terms of the unknown, fear of what lies ahead. The leaps into the river can be considered a cleansing, as it were, as in the jump Finny proposes after the tie-incident tea-function. He suggests they climb up together; so it is that they are both on the limb when Gene slips and loses his footing. It is the swift, instinctive action of Finny that saves Gene; he grabs hold; "Finny had practically saved my life."

Chapter Three:

Except one could consider it another way; if it weren't for Finny, Gene wouldn't have been there in the first place. As Chapter two ends with Gene's near fall and Finny reaching out to save his life, this chapter opens up with dual reactions. Gene is grateful Finny caught him but resentful too, for, as he rightly admits to himself, if it weren't for Finny, Gene would not have been on the branch in the first place. Branch is evocative, symbolic – he literally goes out on a limb for Finny; to go out on a limb means to take chances. Further, to be a branch is to be an off-shoot of a larger limb or of the trunk. Trees grow upward (positive symbol) and into the grounded (to be grounded). Skyward implies dreamer – Finny; roots imply sensibility, practicality (Gene). Both characteristics can be seen as good, and together can form a powerful team.

The jumps form part of the Super Suicide Society; a society that Finny establishes will meet nightly. Gene resents the nightly meeting and hates the jump, yet he will never articulate this, nor will he miss either.

Super Suicide Society of the Summer Sessions (started by Finny and Gene goes along with it although he doesn't enjoy it. Nightly meetings. Every night. Gene will come to resent these meetings as distractions from his studies.

He notes the sticking to routines for things that matter; the secret society; the tree jumping, but not to the rules he sees as trivial or foolish. He is a stickler for the truth (never say you are taller than you are) and deems athleticism as the highest pinnacle of personal challenge/goals. Thus, his contempt for the summer program (badminton) creates the game of rules established by Finny of Blitzball; the term coming from the bombing of Europe by Germany and an allusion to the far away war not yet real in their lives.

Blitzball is a strange game involving a medicine ball and of rules that show no sides, no

teams because at one time or another your friend becomes your enemy; that “we will all turn on each other all the time.”

Blitzball is a game of persuasion, of word play, hypnotic movements, all in Finny's element. It pushes them physically and is a game of strategy; Finny excels at it, and while the others struggle to keep up, Gene feels, once again, as if he can bask in the glow that is Finny's appeal.

Back to the notion of rules:

Blitzball (named for the German tactic of speed/surprise – blitzkrieg is another symbol from this chapter) A game, invented by Finny, that has rules which change all the time, yet the keys ones are these: that one has the right to refuse to participate (Lepellier Refusal) and that everyone is an enemy:

“There aren't any teams in blitzball.”

“We're all enemies.”

“We can turn on each other all the time.’

Finally, consider the athleticism of Finny in breaking a record – swimming – for no other reason than because it was there. Thus, it is a quiet act witnessed only by Gene that Finny keeps secret; for him it is never about acclaim, but always about doing the best of one's ability. However, for Gene, it is about affirmation; he looks to others to find the acceptance missing in himself. Thus, he says of Finny's order to keep the swim record secret;

This summer (42) of the war is the year that will stand out in Gene's mind; the pivotal turning point (inciting incident, catalyst) that will shape the rest of his life. The war is the back drop but for Finny it is all about being in the moment and testing oneself to go beyond one's capabilities, as in the time he breaks the A. Hopkins Parker's swimming record (yet does not/forbids any attention about it). It is not about fame or acclaim; it is about personal best.

Gene's reaction about this? “You're too good to be true.” (Wee bit of foreshadowing and In many ways, it is true, as the story later shows. Finny is a symbol of ideals but our world is

one of mistakes and failings.). It starts a jealous introspection on his part; why not shout it out? Because rivalry is an unnatural state for Finny and not being a rival is a foreign concept to Gene.

Despite Gene's his inner nature (to study, to obey orders, to follow rules) will not resist any idea Finny proposes, so he goes with Finny to the beach. Thus, like the second wave that knocks him under, pulls him in, consider Gene as if in the wake/slipstream of Finny's presence, not as powerful and unable to resist, and desiring at points to pull out ahead, be the best at something.

The beach scene is significant. It was again Finny's idea, not Gene's. Again it will take Gene away from his study and indeed he fails the test the following morning. The day and night on the beach is about friendship and being open and living in the moment, yet when Finny calls Gene "his best pal" Gene does not respond, instead observing both it was "a courageous thing to say"; after all, such declarations leave one vulnerable to rejection. What Gene feels is: *a level of feeling, deeper than thought, which contains the truth.*