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English 9

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Doubly Demoted

John Knowles's A Separate Peace pivots around Gene's return to the Devon School fifteen years after the death of his best friend – a death he feels ultimately responsible for – to do what? He claims earlier in the text's chronology (as opposed to its pagination) that he's already achieved an understanding of Finny's true nature, an understanding of his own motives in hurting Finny, "a separate peace," if you will. So then why must he return years later to visit the two "crime scenes" – the tree and the stairs? Perhaps it is to achieve an even greater sense of peace, or at least a renewed sense of peace, either of which he apparently achieves by the end of the visit. However, the oddities in his closing remarks in addition to disturbing echoes of the past still haunting him at the beginning of his visit suggest that he's still deceiving himself as he always has about himself and Finny, that his new "separate peace" will prove as illusory as all previous ones, and that Gene will continue to deny the true nature of his own character flaws and those of the one he came to worship only at his death – Phineas himself.

What Gene fails to realize the most at the end of his visit is the cold comfort his new sense of nihilism will eventually deliver. As Gene notices the once ominous and imposing stature of the tree demoted by time, he generalizes his

discovery to all experience and applies it especially to his own past: "Nothing endures, not a tree, not love, not even a death by violence" (4). In other words, nothing ultimately matters; therefore, pain can exert no ultimate grip on the soul. These closing reflections resemble his equally disturbing initial observations about his relation to the school itself: "In the deep, tacit way in which feeling becomes stronger than thought, I had always felt the Devon School came into existence the day I entered it, was vibrantly real while I was a student there, and then blinked out like a candle the day I left it" (1). But tellingly, in direct contrast to the fading and failing of the tree, the school exerts a stronger and more imposing presence than ever. Nowhere is this more evident than in the surface of the fatal staircase, the scene of Finny's ultimate demise:

In through swinging doors I reached a marble foyer, and stopped at the foot of a long white marble flight of stairs. Although they were very old stairs, the worn moons in the middle of each step were not very deep. The marble must be unusually hard. That seemed very likely, only too likely, although with all my thought about these stairs exceptional hardness had not occurred to me. It was surprising that I had overlooked that, that crucial fact. (8)

The hardness of that marble surface has barely changed, if at all, in the interim of his absence. The school is still present, despite his tacit belief to the contrary. The past still exists, despite his hope to the contrary. For what ultimate hope can

nihilism provide? In its erasure of the value (and even existence) of the past, will it not erase the present as well, including “the comfort” Gene thinks he feels?

Once again, why must Gene return to the scenes of the crime, if they never really mattered to begin with? Gene is deceiving himself. He cannot stop his love for Finny. He cannot erase the death by violence. Though diminished in its stature, the tree still stands, and the stairs still rise up with an exceptional hardness that can neither be ignored nor forgotten.

One other dead giveaway of Gene’s continual reliance upon self-deception is his notion of escaping fear. Gene reflects: “Looking back now across fifteen years, I could see with great clarity the fear I had lived in, which must mean that in the interval I had succeeded in a very important undertaking: I must have made my escape from it” (1). “Escape” proves a slippery word in this text, a novel that delights in setting up elaborate word associations that reverberate in meaning across its surface. For the word is never used with a positive connotation anywhere else in the narration. Indeed, the second most horrifying incident, second only to Finny’s demise and death, is Leper’s “escape” from the war. More significant than any physical escape from his assigned military division is Leper’s mind’s escape from any semblance of sanity. Immediately before Gene receives word of this escape into madness, the word is used again, this time in reference to the illusion of happiness, security, and peace: “It wasn’t the cider which made me surpass myself, 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" (81). Thus, what value can Gene hope to attain from his own failed and failing escape from fear? Once again, the text gives Gene away. The only other time Gene's narration claims an escape from fear occurs at the jouncing of the limb, when "With unthinking sureness I moved out on the limb and jumped into the river, every trace of my fear of this forgotten" (32). Of course, Gene can keep his fear at bay only for a brief, fleeting moment as he hurtles through the air. Will his final attempt at escaping fear prove any more successful?

Gene will always fail at escaping his fear, at concocting a separate peace for himself, because he has never faced the truth about his own nature and about his relationship to Finny, bound up in this case inextricably together. Forever jealous of Finny, forever allowing Finny to impose his own personality upon himself, Gene clings to a co-dependence upon his friend to avoid developing his own sense of self: "I had no idea why this gave me such intense relief, but it seemed, standing there in Finny's triumphant shirt, that I would never stumble through the confusions of my own character again" (33). Or would this passage suit more to the purpose?

So to Phineas I said, "I'm too busy for sports," and he went into his incoherent groans and jumbles of words, and I thought the issue was settled until at the end he said, "Listen, pal, if I can't play sports, you're going to play them for me," and I lost part of myself to him then, and a

soaring sense of freedom revealed that this must have been my purpose from the first: to become a part of Phineas. (47-48)

Or this one?

I did not cry then or ever about Finny. I did not cry even when I stopped watching him being lowered into his family's strait-laced burial ground outside of Boston. I could not escape [there's that word again—notice that here he acknowledges there is no escape, though he so desperately desires and convinces himself there is one later] a feeling that this was my own funeral, and you do not cry in that case. (116)

Once Phineas dies, Gene idolizes him, transmuting his vices into virtues:

During the time I was with him, Phineas created an atmosphere in which I continued now to live, a way of sizing up the world with erratic and entirely personal reservations, letting its rocklike facts sift through and be accepted only a little at a time, only as much as he could assimilate without a sense of chaos and loss. (121)

For it is this way of sizing up the world that Finny had imposed upon Gene from the beginning and it is precisely this that Gene had resented--that Finny failed to see him--because in a palpable sense, Finny could only ever see himself. Finny could never see Gene's needs, Gene's anxieties, Gene's confusions. They did not even matter—only Finny's contagious, outlandish, dangerous foray into fantasy to see reality only in his own terms. And so Gene encourages the lies, the deception,

to avoid coming to terms with not knowing himself, because he finds Finny's self-deception more attractive than his own. And so they lie to the end. Even on what proves to be Finny's death bed, in what proves to be their final conversation, they both lie to the bitterest of ends, epitomized by Finny's false summation:

"Then that was it. 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" (115). Lying has never been known to produce peace, only more lies. Never coming to a real peace with Finny, Gene refuses to come to real peace with himself. Instead, he pretends that he is even more a part of Phineas than he was before (when he resented Phineas). And eventually, fifteen years later, he tries to convince himself that it doesn't matter anyway.

Perhaps a much more truthful ending to the text (for Gene, anyway, and perhaps even for the reader) would have been Gene's almost mystical vision he experiences just before encountering the real, live Finny for the last time. Indeed, it bespeaks a direct contrast to Gene's belied sense on the first page of the novel that he alone is real and all else ceases to exist without his enlivening presence. Instead, it reverse the roles and reveals Gene as the poseur, unreal because unknown:

I was trying to cope with something that might be called double vision
 [...]The old trees [...] were all intensely meaningful, with a message that
 was very pressing and entirely indecipherable. Here the road turned to the

left and became dirt. It proceeded along the lower end of the playing fields, and under the pale night glow the playing fields swept away from me in slight frosty undulations which bespoke meanings upon meanings, levels of reality I had never suspected before, a king of thronging and epic grandeur which my superficial eyes and cluttered mind had been blind to before.

They unrolled away impervious to me as though I were a roaming ghost, not only tonight but always, as though I had never played on them a hundred times, as though my feet had never touched them, as though my whole life at Devon had been a dream, or rather that everything at Devon, the playing fields, the gym, the water hole, and all the other buildings and all the people there were intensely real, wildly alive and totally meaningful, and I alone was a dream, a figment which had never really touched anything. I felt that I was not, never had been and never would be a loving part of this overpoweringly solid and deeply meaningful world around me.

(112)

A true escape from this monumental, colossal fear--an authentic separate peace--would only have been accomplished by self-discovery, a construction of a real person and persona separate from the tangled web of Gene's idolization and idolatry of Finny.

Perhaps then the demoted tree at the beginning of the text, which, paradoxically, is the end of the story, is not at all a reduced image of the horrors of

the past, as Gene supposes, but is instead an image of the atrophied, ghost-stricken soul – “aged, enfeebled, dry” (6). In other words, it is the image of Gene himself, doubly demoted – never able to accept the truth, ever blind to the necessity of doing so.