

## The Tree of Panic in *A Separate Peace*

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### Abstract

With the growth in popularity of young adult (YA) literature over the past few decades, novels such as John Knowles's 1959 classic *A Separate Peace* deserve to be analyzed for typical YA themes, such as sexuality, identity, dysfunctional family units, and coming of age motifs. This paper evaluates *A Separate Peace* from a queer theory perspective while analyzing symbolic elements and themes. By examining these YA themes, teachers can offer fresh perspectives while teaching classic novels that have withstood the test of time.

### Keywords

Knowles; *A Separate Peace*; queer literature, YAL; young adult; symbolism; World War II; biblical; tree of knowledge; homosexual panic; guilt; Genesis; coming of age.

John Knowles's *A Separate Peace* takes place in 1942 at the Devon boarding school for boys in New England where World War II serves as a significant backdrop. The narrative follows two close friends, Phineas (called Finny) and Gene, who share a life-changing summer together. A tree serves as a crucial part of the story because it provides a setting, centralizes conflicts, and serves as a symbol on multiple levels. When the reader is first introduced to the tree, it is described as “. . . tremendous, an irate, steely black steeple beside the river . . . Its soaring black trunk was set with rough wooden pegs leading up to a substantial limb which extended farther toward the water” (Knowles 14-15). The tree symbolizes the boys' rebellion against the strict school rules and the biblical tree of knowledge, and serves as a phallic symbol representing the homosexual relationship between Finny and Gene that is forbidden by society.

Despite the rumor that “the seventeen-year-old-bunch” jumps from the large limb into the river below, climbing the tree and jumping into the water directly violates school policy (Knowles 14). Knowing jumping is forbidden attracts Finny to jump from the tree. Finny successfully makes the jump and immediately begins pressuring Gene to make the leap. Both boys complete the jump uninjured, so the boys attempt to convince other classmen to jump, but they refuse.

The following night Finny and Gene decide to jump from the tree again. This time they choose to give their antics a title—“The Super Suicide Society of Summer Session” (Knowles 31). Soon, other classmen are initiated into the group. After many nights of having Suicide Society meetings, Gene becomes unable to focus on his studies. In his frustration, Gene decides Finny is purposely hindering his focus so he will not receive better grades than Finny. For weeks, Gene allows these ideas to fester inside his head. One day while heading to the tree, he confronts Finny about his assumptions. Finny's response is so innocent that Gene immediately knows he has been wrong about Finny's intentions; however, in a strange lapse of judgement, Gene “jounced the limb” causing Finny to fall with a “sickening, unnatural thud” (Knowles 60). This fall results in Finny breaking his leg, which ends Finny's athletic career. Events unfold throughout the book until eventually the fall leads to Finny's death.

Though there are opposing viewpoints of what the tree actually symbolizes, clearly the story centers around the tree. James Ellis argues the tree represents “. . . the Biblical tree of knowledge . . . [and] . . . is the means in which Gene will renounce the Eden-like summer peace of Devon . . . [which represents] . . . the fall from innocence and at the same time prepares himself for the second world war” (Ellis 313-14). Although Ellis offers a convincing argument that the tree represents the biblical tree of knowledge, saying Gene is attempting to end the Eden-like summer to prepare for

the war would be a stretch. The seniors *are* required to jump from the tree as a form of training to become soldiers; however, only Finny mentions the connection to jumping as a way of preparing for paratrooper training. Gene has not mentioned much about the war. Each mention of the war has come from Finny; therefore, there is no evidence to support the claim that Gene is preparing for the war or is unhappy in the safe surroundings of the school.

In both situations, Devon school and Eden, rules forbid them from going near the tree. At Devon, the headmaster has set clear rules forbidding the climbing of and jumping from the tree. In Eden, God stated they must not partake of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Of course, Adam and Eve both partake of the tree, causing the fall of man which symbolically parallels directly with the physical fall of Finny. In Genesis when Adam is instructed to stay away from the tree, he is told if they partake of the tree they will die. When Adam and Eve eat from the tree of knowledge, they do not immediately die; however, they are banished from the Garden of Eden and thus no longer allowed to eat from the tree of life which is their source of longevity. This results in their now inevitable death. Again, Adam and Eve's fall parallels directly with the fall of Finny. The fall from the tree did not kill Finny, yet it resulted in his death months later.

As further punishment for eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge, Adam and Eve were separated from the presence of God which correlates with the tree causing both a physical and emotional divide between Finny and Gene. Prior to the fall, Gene becomes emotionally bitter that he cannot find time to study as a result of the Suicide Society. This rift in their friendship would not have occurred without the temptation of the forbidden tree. Once Adam and Eve are separated from God's presence, they cling to each other for comfort. This is similar to the relationship of Finny and Gene. Out of both guilt and personal feelings, Gene becomes closer to Finny. In many ways, Finny's fall has created a stronger emotional connection between Finny and Gene.

Comparing the tree in *A Separate Peace* to the biblical tree of knowledge leads directly to comparing Finny and Gene to Adam and Eve. In this comparison, since Finny was the first to jump from the tree and the source of tempting Gene to jump, it would stand to reason that Finny would be more comparative to Eve, who was the first to partake of the forbidden fruit. There is ample evidence to argue from a queer theory perspective that Gene and Finny are homosexual and unable to express their true feelings. The most crucial piece of evidence for this interpretation appears relatively early within the narrative. In chapter two, Finny and Gene are getting ready to attend the Headmaster's Tea. Finny puts on a shirt and Gene looks at the shirt and exclaims "Pink! It makes you look like a *fairy!*" (Knowles 24). Finny dismisses the comment for a moment then simply responds, "I wonder what would happen if I looked like a fairy to everyone" (Knowles 25). This appears to be a clear indication that Finny has considered what other people would think if they realized he was homosexual; on the other hand, it also appears Gene has given some thought to the consequences of being perceived homosexual, and clearly fears the backlash of others. Although they are in a homosocial environment where they are "expected to study, play, work, and fight together . . . they are absolutely forbidden to engage in sexual relations with each other. Thus, the flip side of male homosocial bonding is homophobia" (McGavran 69). Homosocial environments such as Devon school enforce strong rules banning sexual relationships between classmates. As a result, fear develops surrounding such relationships; therefore, homophobia or homosexual panic manifests from these fears.

Eric L. Tribunella observes ". . . Gene jounces the limb and sends Finny crashing to the ground in a violent moment of homosexual panic" (Tribunella 91). There is unmistakable evidence for this in Gene's realization that Finny truly cared for him and was not trying to sabotage his grades. In the moments leading up the jouncing of the limb, Finny and Gene are both naked, standing on the tree limb, and Finny attempts to take Gene's hand so they can jump together. In this moment, Gene, realizing there are witnesses at the base of the tree, goes into a homosexual panic

that causes him to assert his masculinity, thus causing Finny to fall from the tree. Living in a world that naturalizes heterosexuality has caused Gene to fear he will be perceived as homosexual if he does not guard himself by asserting his masculinity.

Taking into consideration the evidence that Finny and Gene have homosexual desires, the tree could be symbolic beyond the reference to Eden. In Edith Wharton's 1911 novella *Ethan Frome*, the tree is widely believed to be a phallic symbol representing the forbidden desires shared between Zeena and Ethan. The same symbolic use can be applied to the tree in *A Separate Peace*. Each time Finny and Gene climb the tree, they strip down naked. The first time the boys jump from the tree they get dressed afterwards and head toward the dining hall, but they decide to skip dinner. Instead, they wrestle in the grass: "I [Gene] threw my hip against his, catching him by surprise, and he was instantly down, definitely pleased. When I jumped on top of him, my knees on his chest, he couldn't ask for anything better...and when we were sure we were too late for dinner, we broke it off" (Knowles 19). This scene demonstrates a sexual playfulness between Gene and Finny. The fact they have "...missed nine meals in the last two weeks" indicates Finny and Gene are constantly carving out *a separate piece* (as in a segment) of time to be alone (Knowles 22). Skipping meal times ensures they will have uninterrupted time, since the other boys will be in the dining hall.

The significance of the tree is clearly evident throughout John Knowles's *A Separate Peace*, serving as the main setting and symbolizing either the biblical tree of knowledge or functioning as a phallic symbol representing Gene and Finny's homosexuality that is forbidden by society. The story is told from the viewpoint of Gene, who is looking back on the events from fifteen years earlier when he attended Devon school alongside Finny. Gene states, "Looking back now across fifteen years, I could see with great clarity the fear I had lived in" (Knowles 10). This passage serves as further evidence that Gene may have jounced Finny from the limb in a moment of fear or homosexual panic. In the conclusion of the book, Gene describes the bond he had with Finny by saying, "... he was, however, present in every moment of everyday . . . During the time I was with him, Phineas created an atmosphere in which I continued to live . . . He possessed an extra vigor, a heightened confidence in himself, a serene capacity for affection . . . harmonious and natural unity . . . My fury was gone . . . Phineas has absorbed it and taken it with him, and I was rid of it forever" (Knowles 202-203). This description appears to be a testimony by Gene that he now accepts himself. He no longer fears the reaction of others because he now lives with confidence, "Phineas-filled" (Knowles 204).

### Works Cited

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