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Teaching John Knowles'

A Separate Peace

from

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by

Tom Zolpar



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General Introduction to the Work

About *A Separate Peace*

A *SEPARATE PEACE* IS JOHN KNOWLES'S first published novel, released in 1959. The coming-of-age novel, or *bildungsroman*, is Knowles's most widely-known work. A **bildungsroman**, also sometimes called a "novel of formation" is a specific type of coming-of-age novel that presents the psychological, moral and social maturation of the protagonist. Common elements of the *bildungsroman* include:

- The protagonist embarks on a journey—whether literal or metaphoric—which prompts his or her growth from child to adult.
- The protagonist must have a reason to embark upon this journey—a loss or feeling of discontent.
- The process of maturation is long and difficult. The protagonist experiences repeated clashes between his or her needs and desires and the stringent values of an unbending social order.

Eventually, as the protagonist matures socially, emotionally, and psychologically, he or she is assimilated into the society. The novel ends with the protagonist's new assessment of him or herself and his or her new place in that society.

A Separate Peace is Gene's *bildungsroman*. Returning as an adult to the locale of his coming-of-age, Gene narrates the events of the summer of 1942 and the following school year, the period during which he faces and overcomes the dark forces of his own psyche. The novel ends with Gene's high school graduation, symbolic of his entry into adulthood and his assimilation into a world defined by the aftermath of World War II.

Formalism Applied to *A Separate Peace*



Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.

Activity One

Contrasting the Two Thematic “Halves” of the Novel

1. Have students reread the early descriptions of the Devon and Naguamsett Rivers in Chapters 1 and 6.
2. Discuss the implications of the relative locations of the two rivers.
 - What is the symbolic significance of the Devon River’s being fresh water?
 - What is the symbolic significance of the Naguamsett River’s being salt?
3. What is the first sentence of Chapter 6? How does this contrast with Gene’s description of Devon during the summer session?
4. Contrast the boys’ use of the Devon and Naguamsett Rivers.
 - What is the symbolic significance of how the boys enter the rivers?
5. How can Chapter 6 be considered the beginning of the second half of the novel?
6. How is the second half likely to differ from the first? What evidence suggests this interpretation?
7. Have students reread the opening section. How has Knowles foreshadowed the two key events of the novel?

Mythological/Archetypal Applied to *A Separate Peace*



Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is "a figure... that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested." He believed that human beings were born with an innate knowledge of certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a life-after-death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When looking for archetypes or myths, critics take note of general themes, characters, and situations that recur in literature and myth. In modern times, traditional literary and mythological archetypes are successfully translated to film. For example, Jane Austen's *Emma* was adapted into the popular Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to feel that they know the characters in a work with very little background information. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!



3. Archetypal Situations

- the QUEST: the hero's endeavor to establish his or her identity or fulfill his or her destiny.

Variations on the QUEST can include:

- the Faustian bargain: the selling of one's soul to the devil (metaphorically representing the notion that one would "give anything" in order to...) in exchange for unlimited power, knowledge, wealth, etc. Examples include King Midas.
- the pursuit of revenge for a real or perceived wrong, as exemplified by Captain Ahab's quest in *Moby Dick*.
- the descent into the underworld. (Note that this is usually one part of the quest rather than the entire quest itself.)
- the RENEWAL OF LIFE: death and rebirth, resurrection as seen in the cycle of the seasons, the phases of the day, sleeping and waking. Examples are "Sleeping Beauty," "The Secret Garden," etc.
- INITIATION: coming of age, rites of passage. Some examples include the first hunt, weddings, teenage angst films.
- THE FALL: any event that marks a loss of innocence, a devolution from a paradisaical life or view-point to a tainted one.
- REDEMPTIVE SACRIFICE: any voluntary loss, especially a loss of life, that results in another's gaining or regaining a desired state.
- the CATALOG OF DIFFICULT TASKS: (labors of Hercules, Cinderella's treatment by her step-mother and stepsisters, etc.).
- the END OF THE WORLD: usually apocalyptic, involving warfare, a huge battle, a metaphoric final battle between good and evil.

Variations on the end of the world include:

- Armageddon: the final battle between good and evil according to the Christian New Testament (book of Revelation), in which evil is finally vanquished, evildoers receive their eternal punishment, and God reigns over a newly-created Heaven and Earth;

Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *A Separate Peace*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERM “PSYCHOLOGICAL” (also “psychoanalytical” or “Freudian Theory”) seems to encompass two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

Activity One

Analyzing Gene and Finny as Polar Opposites or Complementary Characters

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *A Separate Peace*: Psychoanalytic Activity One
2. In full-class discussion, list Gene's and Finny's key characteristics (e.g., Gene is introverted, academic, moody; Finny is extroverted and charismatic, athletic, etc.).
3. Have students—individually, in pairs, or in small groups—review the book and complete one or more of the graphics on the handout.
4. Reconvene the class and allow students/groups to share their findings.
5. Discuss the theses developed by the groups.

NOTE: For additional enrichment, assign one or more of the theses as writing assignments.