

Macrocosm/Microcosm in *A Separate Peace*

By John Knowles



American Character

According to Knowles, the major concern of the novel is to expose and explore the two conflicting psychological forces within the “American Character”:

1. One is a creative and expressive force, “a germ of wildness”
2. The other, is a more conservative force that identifies with established institutions such as governments, academic settings, and accepted values.

In the book, this conflict is symbolically represented in the personalities of the main characters. Gene Forrester, the narrator, is “**the cautious Protestant**” who is both fascinated with and frightened by the “**germ of wildness**” he sees in the powerful personality of his roommate, Phineas. Over time, each boy acquires traits from the other. Although the focus of the novel is on Gene’s resolution of his conflicts with Phineas, it is apparent that Phineas also achieves a “separate peace.”

Microcosm

- Devon School in New Hampshire is the setting.
- Devon represents WWII's effects on a small, private boarding school.
- The central story begins less than a year after December 7, 1941, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, in Hawaii.

Setting

- Devon Academy - a private preparatory school modeled after Phillips Exeter and similar institutions in New England that traditionally prepared an elite group of young men for Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and other Ivy League colleges.
- Privileged by wealth and family connections, their students joined exclusive clubs in college and then took places reserved for them in the business world and in the highest social circles.
- Such New England boarding schools have been the traditional training ground for America's aristocracy.
- Today most preparatory schools are coeducational, but they still provide a rigorous education for a selected few.

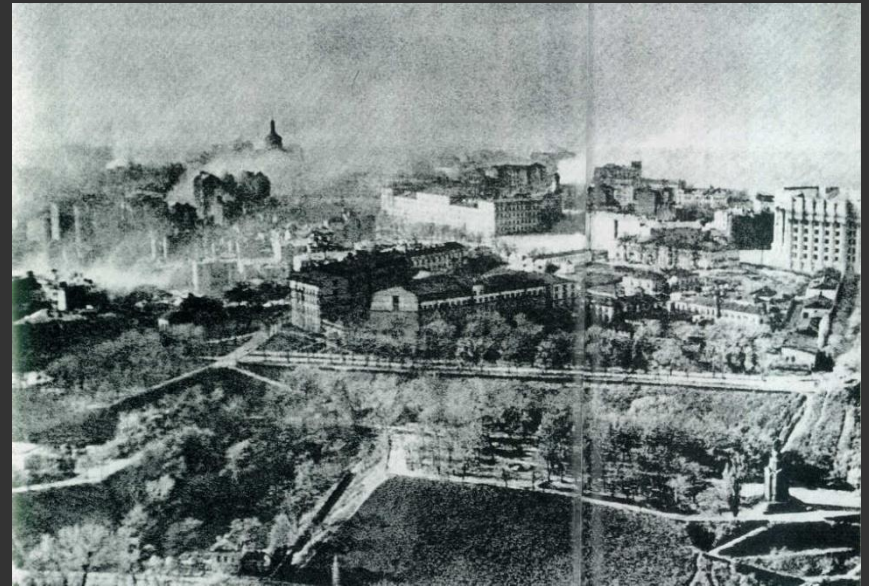
World War II

- World War II: September 1939 to September 1945.
- Called the “World” war because a majority of the world’s nations split into one of two opposing sides:
 - Allies- included Russia, U.S.A, United Kingdom, and China.
 - Axis- included Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan



World War II

- The most devastating war in history.
- Loss of human life estimated at 72 million.
- Two-thirds of victims were civilians.
- Holocaust victims numbered in the millions.



U.S. Involvement



- The U.S. entered the World War after Pearl Harbor.
- Fear of war caused many Americans to turn a blind eye to the conflicts overseas.
- Pearl Harbor changed everything.
- 1940 brought the first peacetime draft in the nation's history.
 - Men 21-35 years of age were required to register for military service.
 - Age then lowered to eighteen.

Patriotism

- Many young men couldn't wait to be drafted; patriotism was at an all-time high.
- Teenagers often felt it was their duty to enlist.



Patriotism and Change



- The war brought changes to the American economy and lifestyle.
 - Need for weapons created jobs.
 - Americans attended rallies, bought war bonds, conserved fuel and rubber by car pooling, and planted “victory gardens.”
 - Society also began changing and adjusting due to the “man shortage”.
- In short, American life, as it had been, changed “for the duration”- a phrase that meant “until the end of the war.”

Macrocosm

- The most important aspect of the novel's background is WWII and its impact on the lives of young Americans.
- World War II began in 1939 and ended in 1945.
- *A Separate Peace* is set during the years 1942 and 1943, when it seemed that the fighting might continue indefinitely.

- The almost certainty of young men being drafted into a bloody war upon graduation from school forms the background of *A Separate Peace*.
- The United States drafted more than ten million men for service in World War II; of these, more than five hundred thousand were killed or wounded.
- Students nearing graduation-like Gene, Finny, and Brinker-knew they would face the draft very soon.
- Some students sought to avoid dangerous service in the infantry by volunteering for special programs before being called-for example, Leper Lepellier's enlistment in the ski troops and the plans Gene and Brinker discuss in Chapter 13.

- World War II resulted from the threat of aggressive expansion in Europe by Germany and in the Pacific by Japan.
- Upon the bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese on December 7, 1941, America finally declared war in both Europe and the Pacific.
- By 1942, the year in which *A Separate Peace* is set, Germany had overrun Norway, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands in the west, and had thrust deep into Russia in the east.

- During the period covered by the novel, the US was just beginning to make its presence felt by joining British bombers in air attacks over Germany.
- The final phase of the European war began on June 6, 1944, when the allies announced a massive invasion of Normandy.
- After intense fighting across the European continent, the war ended Europe on May 8, 1945; the Japanese surrendered some four months later.

Works Cited

- [classroom.kleinisd.net/users/3083/docs/separate_peace...A](http://classroom.kleinisd.net/users/3083/docs/separate_peace...)
Separate Peace by John Knowles Author Information
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