

## **Merit of English Section**

### **Senior Division**

**Name of Winner: Jeong Man Cheng**

**Name of School : Pui Ching Middle**

**School Macau**

**Book Title : A Separate Peace**

**Author : Secker & Warburg**

**Publisher : John Knowles**

#### **1. Summary**

The novel, “A Separate Peace” by John Knowles, tells a story about two close friends, Gene and Phineas in early World War II, who both studied in a boarding school. Yet, adolescence has a complex nature that affects friendship. Gene is clever, and introverted, but has fewer friends, whereas Phineas is boisterous, popular, and an attractive athlete. The novel discusses how rivalry

and envy between people can lead to a relationship's collapse and broken peace. Gene's jealousy subsequently resulted in Phineas tripping down the stairs and breaking his leg, which prevented him from continuing his athletic career in the future. Phineas accepted Gene's apology, but his surgery eventually cost him his life. The novel leaves with Gene revisiting and looking back at the boarding school as a grownup and reflecting on his relationship with and guilt toward Phineas.

## **2. What I particularly like about the novel**

This novel inspired me since it does not only show the competition and jealousy between two close friends, but also the paradox from the character Gene, who on one hand is envious of Phineas's talent and popularity, but also shows some admiration and hints of romantic feelings towards him. This reflected a lot of

the

reality of adolescence, where teenagers are still confused about their feelings towards different people.

The beach scene is rather intriguing, as the place is described as the 'shores of Eden' emitting a heavenly setting as well as promoting a sense of boyhood and freedom. When Gene gets up from his sleep at dawn, he

watches Phineas with a sense of admiration. This scene was interesting since it provided multiple interpretations for me and even foreshadows possible endings of the story. In addition, Knowles also reflected the confusion that adolescents experience, such as being exposed to homosexuality and romance, which is particularly new to us.

Furthermore, Knowles's description of the Devon

School was written particularly well and realistic. The Devon School reveals the harsh competition between the students, which is very prevalent in the real world, where everyone wants to achieve the very best. One of the most significant examples is between Gene and Phineas. After Gene flunks his trigonometry test, he reflects on what it would mean for him to come out on the top of his class and for Finny to be the star athlete at school: "If I was head of the class on Graduation Day and made a speech and won the Ne Plus Ultra Scholastic Achievement Citation, then we would both

have come out on top; we would be even". This suggests that Gene realizes that his ultimate goal for the summer semester is solely to become even with Finny.

He feels that it's necessary to compete with his best friend and achieve superiority. But the reality is that Finny would never want to compete with Gene. This made me fall in love with the character Phineas. Not only does he have an innocent heart in the relationship with Gene, but he also does not see any negative aspects of other people. In the end, Gene is the only one who is leading this competition, yet Phineas continues to be mature and gentle, and for me, it makes him a spiritual role model. This is also one of the strengths of the novel, which is to educate young teenagers like me about how people occasionally create a personal conflict and opponent for themselves even in times of peace and spend their lives defending themselves against this

adversary, who may or may not actually exist. Additionally, it offers me life advice by warning teenagers like me about some of the implications of entering society, where everyone must learn to accept themselves as individuals who are accountable for their own behaviors and decisions.

### **3. Weaknesses of the Novel**

Although this novel explored interesting and realistic conflicts experienced during adolescence, there are some parts that frustrated me as a reader. Since the novel is narrated by Gene, it presents little information about the narrator himself as well as other perspectives on events, whether they would have been interpreted differently by other characters or not. As Gene is the only narrator, he is the only character that I can retrieve information from, and this limits perspectives. I believe

that some descriptions of events and how he sees Phineas is very opinionated and mostly based on Gene's perspective, limiting me to an understanding of only his feelings towards a specific event but not the feelings of others like Phineas. Therefore, I can only learn about the characterization and the person that Phineas is through Gene's lens, which is sometimes not reliable since he would add some emotions to what he describes. Only his perception of events can be interpreted, and this makes me feel as a reader that I was somehow forced into his ideology of events and his recalling of events as a reference, while other interpretations of other characters could differ or provide contrasting views.

The story's ending was also rather unusual for me, and I was not able to understand it. Sadly, Phineas passed away during surgery after Gene's "accident" caused his leg to break. Gene, on the other hand,

escaped punishment, and the book ends with Gene reflecting on what happened at Devon School. The novel's ending stirred up a range of conflicted feelings in me. On the one hand, the ending is a way for Gene to come to terms with his evil nature toward Phineas and the guilt he should have felt after everything he's done. On the other hand, this ending is not really fair to Phineas, who is the one suffering and is left with nothing when the novel ends. Phineas clearly deserves more, especially in light of what Gene did to him and the misunderstandings he caused regarding their rivalry and enmity. After reading this, I felt quite sick, and I realized that sometimes we just cannot fulfill our dreams and that people around us may not be as good as we think, that there is always some unseen animosity and ill will between individuals. The novel's ending also made me realize



that not all bad people would receive their punishment,

and

envy and jealousy would lead to undesirable

consequences. This novel has inspired

me to reflect on various people and I have had ambivalent feelings about relationships.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, since this novel is written from Gene's point of view, knowledge concerning other characters may be biased. This prevents readers from having a full understanding of the events that have happened. However, this novel examines conflicts that are incredibly relatable to readers today, such as the difficulties involved in the development of deep feelings in a relationship, academic competition, etc. All of these situations are ones that modern teenagers encounter and struggle to resolve. As a result, this novel gives readers a very complete look into the process of growing up and may even offer some guidance for younger readers. In general, I recommend this novel to younger readers, especially adolescents, since this is the

time when we face many challenges before entering society, including how to handle relationships, how to recognize our true emotions, and more.

(1,198 words)