Carson Stark

Mrs. Schindler

English II PAP - 2

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A Separate Peace Essay

In John Knowles a Separate Peace, the main character and narrator of the story, Gene, is an unreliable narrator. He constantly exaggerates people's personalities, appearances, and actions; including his own. One of the many effects of an unreliable narrator is that it causes the reader to question the leading points in the story, along with what is and is not exaggerated.

The most obvious exaggeration is Finny’s personality. He is often described as perfect and christ-like, but he was more than likely a normal highschool boy. His personality was over-exaggerated by Gene due to the way things played out in the end. For example, he says Finny is so honest that he will not even lie about small height differences, “never say you are five feet nine when you are five feet eight and a half.” (Knowles 14) Most people Finny’s age do not have a personal philosophy such as “a way of sizing up the world with erratic and entirely personal reservations,” which is probably Gene putting an adult lens on an irrational tennager having fun. Yet another example of this exaggeration is that while Gene says Finny was perfect and everyone looked up to him, but no large funeral was mentioned no one else but Gene bring up Finny in the end. Finny was probably an above average athlete, but not enough above average to garner too much attention. He may have been somewhat popular, but not popular enough to have a huge funeral when he died. Another possibility is, since they were all about to go to war, they could not have had one because they were leaving in the coming weeks. Even then, one of the star athletes dying should have been mourned by a portion of the school, but he did not even get that much.

The next most important exaggeration that Gene makes is his own personality. He sees himself as “the most untrustworthy person [Finny] knows.” (Knowles 111) he constantly mentions how he is not a good person and how he lies all the time, but in reality this is probably his memory playing tricks on him. These traits to this extent are not normal, and since the narrator is obviously unreliable, they should be doubted. His perception of himself, much like his perception of Finny, has been warped over time into more of a tall tale than the truth. Gene describes Finny as described as someone with an “urge to be good.” (Knowles 30) If Gene were that untrustworthy, Finny would not be his “best pal.” (Knowles 48)

Friends normally have similar interests or personalities that compliment one another. Finny and Gene “were the best of friends.”(Knowles 18) Finny and Gene, as described in the novel, are the antithesis to one another in Gene’s eyes. It is unlikely were as different as Gene makes them sound. Gene looked up to Finny a lot, especially after his death. He thinks that “Only Phineas never was afraid, only Phineas never hated anyone.” (Knowles 204) He put Finny on such a pedestal that he lowered his opinion of himself. Gene could not live up to his own expectations of himself and started beating himself up about it. This self deprecation seemingly went unnoticed by himself and others for a long time, eventually culminating in the story he ended up writing.

In conclusion, Gene has been disillusioned by the events in his life so much that it changed the way he sees his past. Over time he has put Finny higher and higher on a pedestal, and putting himself down more and more. This eventually caused him to believe that he was the most untrustworthy person he knew, when in reality Finny would not have been his friend for so long if that had actually been the case. Most people do not really like openly untrustworthy people all that much, as they learn that those people do not make great friends.

Works cited

Knowles, John. A Separate Peace. Scribner 2003