The Enemy Within

Gene Forrester, the narrator and the protagonist, mentally fights his inner self as he comes of age in John Knowles’ *A Separate Peace*. He looks for his enemy in the outside world never realizing that it lies inside him. It is this very enemy which controls Gene’s actions that put his entire life in a state of jeopardy, angst, and regret. Set in Devon School, a boys’ boarding school in New Hampshire, during the Second World War in 1942, the novel revolves around two best friends, Gene and Phineas, with completely different attitudes at life. But their outlook of the world changes as they gain insight into themselves. Gene’s paranoia and his internal conflict result in an unintended “fratricide” while he essentially battles the enemy within causing him to overcome his negative feelings and become a better human being in the end.

The young and inexperienced Gene struggles to comprehend whether or not his relationship as a best friend of Finny, the most popular and sporty boy, is real or simply “too good to be true.” For example, Gene realizes that Phineas despises his [Gene’s] possibility of becoming the valedictorian and head of the class of 1943 and consoles his negative feelings about Finny with evidence that “[He] and Phineas are even already. [They] are even in enmity. [They] are both coldly driving ahead for [themselves] alone” (53) and Gene feels restored that maybe “The deadly rivalry [is] on both sides after all” (54). Gene feels able to finally comprehend what he thinks is the reason for Finny to introduce time involving activities like “Blitzball” and “the Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session”. He lets himself be captured by his mind for what it wants to believe and what would explain the conflict between the two best friends. In addition,
Gene forces himself to accept that “[He is] not of the same quality as [Phineas]” (59) as he finally comes to know that “[Finn] had never been jealous of [him] for a second….there never could have been a rivalry between [them]” (59). He realizes that Finny is morally a lot stronger and better person than he can ever become. Gene goes through mixed emotions when the doubt finally clears and the weight of suspect is lifted off his head as soon as Finny admits “[He] didn’t know [that Gene needs] to study, [Finny doesn’t] think [Gene] ever did. [He thinks] it just [comes] to [him]” (58). All these events confuse the already traumatized Gene as to what his stand is on this relationship. Furthermore, Gene lets his confusion and competition get the better of him when “[He takes] a step toward [Finn], and then his knees [bend] and [he jounces] the limb” (59-60). Gene takes a moral fall alongside Finny’s “unnatural” one from the tree of innocence. His expression of revenge against his fun-loving friend results in a tragedy whose consequences are not foreseen by Gene. He no longer has control over his decisions, actions and emotions as he continues to think of Finny as his chief rival and enemy and proves to Finny that he is better than him when with “unthinking sureness [he moves] out on the limb and [jumps] into the river, every trace of [his] fear of this forgotten” (60) ultimately marking his superiority to Phineas.

Brinker and the others at school strongly think that Gene’s friendship with Finny was fake from the beginning and it was all a part of his plan of getting a room to himself causing them to not look at the big picture as their suspicions are narrowed down by the low possibility of betrayal. Brinker Hadley is envious of Gene and “Wishes [he knew] how to manage things like [Gene]” (87) when he bets “[Gene] knew all the time Finny wouldn’t be back this fall” (88). He thinks the Fall was Gene’s plot to get a big room to himself. It surpasses the immature and innocent Brinker that the Fall signifies something far more evil than he suspects. He positively feels “The truth will out” (88) but never imagines it to affect their lives so severely. He has been
ignorant of the belief that one friend’s emotions can control him so much that it changes not only his but also the destiny of the best friend by conquering their fate.

Gene is perplexed regarding the situation he is stuck in and regrets his past actions as he tries to figure out what came over him that has left him so mentally beaten. For example, he tries to express his regret and apologize to Finny but “[Phineas doesn’t] see why [he] should look so personally shocked. [He looks] like it happened to [him]…” (69). Gene has been so deprived of solace that he is nearly as worn down mentally as Phineas is physically. Gene continues to look for answers as his guilt drives him crazy to the point where he has lost all sense of judgment and struggles to keep his composure. In addition, Gene’s remorse of what had happened worsens as he thinks of the opportunities he had during the summer, “If only I had truly taken advantage of the situation, seized and held and prized the multitudes of advantages the summer offered me; if only I had” (82). He now becomes conscious of the fact that he could have accepted Finny as a good friend and never held his grudge against him. He simply wishes he could go back in time to when the paradise at Devon was not lost and friends had not turned into foes. He realizes the importance of being content with the world and more importantly: himself. Moreover, Finny finally forces himself to believe that his best friend has betrayed him but hopes that “Something just seized [Gene]. It wasn’t anything [he] really felt against [him], it wasn’t some kind of hate [Gene] has felt all along. It wasn’t anything personal” (191). Finny has to accept this as the truth because only this piece would complete the puzzle and rid both friends of the burden. The weight that is taken off Gene is comparable to the Heavens that the Greek Titan ‘Atlas’ lifted. He has always wanted to tell Finny that “It was just some ignorance inside [him], some crazy think inside [him], something blind” (191) that conquered and manipulated him. It takes great will power on Gene’s part to overpower his regret and try admitting the truth. He cannot even stand to look at himself in the mirror and hence it gives him “Immense relief […] standing there in Finny’s triumphant shirt, that [he] would never stumble through the confusions of [his] own
character again” (62). Furthermore, even after 15 years, Gene remains incomplete without Finny on his side, “Nothing endures, not a tree, not love, not even death by violence” (14). He realizes the part this never changing tree has had on his life. Finny’s forgiveness give him the peace to continue living life but he realizes that he traded this consolation for Finny’s life as he would have died of regret no later than when Finny dies of a betrayed and weak heart.

Gene comes so close to his enemy that he does not even realize that it resides within him and who he had thought to be his nemesis turns out to be his role model at life. He always oversaw the goodness in Finny and his paranoia and his internal conflict result in an unexpected “fratricide” while he essentially clashes with the enemy with him. We all try to run away from the truth and so it seems that there are far more Genes in the world than there are Finnys. It is important that we do not surrender our self to the mind and don’t let it dominate us. Rather, we should be the ones dominating it. The ramifications of our deeds are hard to foresee, but if the deeds are done while being pure at heart, the consequences will never haunt us. We must realize that there is goodness in everyone but sometimes gets hidden from us due to our own ignorance.