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Symbolic Names in Knowles's *A Separate Peace*

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John Knowles's popular novel, *A Separate Peace,* has a New England boys' school as the unlikely backdrop for a book whose themes are the loss of innocence and original sin. American writers have treated the subject of the fall of man from the very beginning of our literature, and thus Knowles follows a long tradition, but neither this fact nor the larger allegorical structure of the novel is my concern here.

The point I wish to make concerns Knowles's use of descriptive names in *A Separate Peace,* which seems so obvious that I wonder why, so far as I know, no one has yet made it. The two main characters in the novel are two teenaged school boys named Gene and Phineas, and it is the significance of their names that I want to explicate.

In the case of Gene (whose surname is Forrester), his given name is obviously a shortening of *Eugene,* from the Greek meaning "well-born," implying that the bearer of the name is genetically clean and noble, or at least fortunate in health and antecedents. The idea behind the name ultimately derives from the word *eugenes* from which comes "eugenics," the science that deals with the improvement of the hereditary qualities of individuals and races. The implications of Gene's name are apparent in light of his role in the book. He is the narrator as well as the protagonist. His growth and development *vis-a-vis* his relationship with Phineas provide the basic theme. Gene is the ambitious scion of a Southern family whose home is not precisely located but seems to be in Georgia. The Forresters we presume are well off or at least able to afford an expensive eastern prep school for Gene. Thus Gene's surname fits very well with his given name because he does indeed appear to be a well-born Southern aristocrat. *Forrester* is an Eng-

lish surname that can be traced back to the early Middle Ages, c. 1200's. It derives from the occupation or office of forester, the warden whose duty it was to protect the woods of a lord. The officer was an enforcer, keeper, and custodian. Thus, even Gene's last name suits his role in the novel because he literally becomes a "keeper," first of the dark secret of his guilty act, which crippled Finny; then he keeps up Finny's athletic feats by participating in his stead, and finally he keeps the faith in life that Finny has instilled in him.

It is not only in a social sense that Gene is well born; he is also bright and good at sports, though not so good an athlete as his friend Finny; he appears to embody the Greek ideal of a sound mind in a healthy body, *mens sana in corpore sano.* Gene's appellation also has an ironic aspect because he lacked much while he was growing up despite being well born. From the narrator's account of what he was like when a student at Devon School fifteen years earlier, we learn that he has improved a great deal since the summer of 1942. He has gotten over the fear that haunted him during those years, and he has come through World War II without any scars, either mental, moral, or physical. Gene says, "I began at that point in the emotional examination to note how far my convalescence had gone." As he walks across the campus he notes the way the architecture blends together and wonders, "I could achieve, perhaps unknowingly already had achieved, this growth and harmony myself" (John Knowles, *A Separate Peace,* Batan paperback edition, p. 4; hereafter all page references are to this edition).

Gene now has "more money and success and 'security' than in days when specters seemed to go with me" (p. 3). He has at last come to terms with himself, yet his rehabilitation was due in no small part to Phineas. Thinking of what he owes his former friend, Gene says, "During the time I was with him, Phineas created an atmosphere in which I continued now to live..." (p. 194).

Several critics have noted the source and resolution of the tensions that develop between the two boys as well as the numerous Christian symbols in the novel.[1] Much of the ambiguity in their relationship is explained in terms of an allegory of the fall of man. It seems certain

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[1] See James Ellis, *"A Separate Peace*: The Fall from Grace," *The English Journal,* 53 (1964), 313-318; Paul Withington, *"A Separate Peace:* A Study in Structural Ambiguity," *The English Journal,* 54 (1965), 795-800; and James M. Mellard, "Counterpoint and 'Double Vision' in *A Separate Peace,*" *Studies in Short Fiction,* 4 (1966), 127-135.

that Knowles has an allegorical intention in mind in a plot that features a tree and a series of falls both in the literal, physical and spiritual sense. It seems likewise certain that he chose the names of the two central characters with careful regard for their symbolic meaning as we have already seen in the case of Gene. The choice of the name Phineas even more fully satisfies the meaning of the character's role in the novel. In the first place Phineas is one of those characters in literature and folk culture like Tarzan, Shane, McTeague, and Beowulf who has no last name, which calls attention to the given name and endows it with an added dimension of significance. Secondly, the name *Phineas* is rare in the United States. Even in New England where it was a popular name through the Puritan period, it has steadily died out in the 18th and 19th centuries, and would have been an extremely odd name in the 1940's (see G.R. Stewart, *The American Dictionary of Given Names: Their Origin, History and Context,* New York: Oxford, 1979, 213 pp.).

In literary history the name appears in the titles of two of Anthony Trollope's lesser known novels, *The Phineas Finn, the Irish Member* (1869) and *Phineas Redux* (1874). Jules Verne also gave the name to his central character in *Around the World in Eighty Days* (see p. 8), Professor Phineas T. Fogg. There are more remote literary antecedents for the name in Greek mythology, where numerous writers of antiquity, but most prominently Ovid in his *Metamorphosis* mentions a "Phineas" who was a soothsayer-king of Thrace. He was afflicted with blindness by Zeus who was angered because he revealed the future to mortals. Other versions of the myth say Poseidon blinded Phineus for directing Jason and the Argonauts through the Clashing Rocks (see *Cromwell's Handbook of Classical Mythology,* New York, 1970, pp. 474-75).

One must go to biblical history, however, to find the kernel of meaning which most applies to the character in Knowles's novel. In the Old Testament there are three figures named Phinehas. The name means "oracle" in Hebrew or "mouth of brass" and is first mentioned in *Exodus* (6:25). This Phinehas who is the son of Aaron is a judge and priest; a devout keeper of the covenant with the Lord, he gave rise to a line of priests known as "the sons of Phinehas." There is another person named Phinehas, but he is not so exemplary. He is the youngest son of Eli, a rebellious youth who was a rule breaker; he redeemed himself by protecting the Ark. The third individual who bears the name Phinehas is an angel, and it is this figure who has the most bearing upon the Phineas in the novel. In the book of Judges (2:1) the youngest of the 72 angels of the Lord "who comes up from Gilad" is called Phinehas. This angel's "countenance glowed like a torch when the light of

the Holy Ghost rested upon it," the Scripture says. It is interesting to note at this juncture that an angel is by definition a presence whose powers transcend the logic of our existence. Also as St. Augustine wrote, "Every visible thing in this world is put under the charge of an angel." (See Gusta Davidson, *A Dictionary of Angels* (New York: Macmillan, 1967, p. 224).

While it might be possible to make a tangential application of the careers of the first two biblical characters to the situation of Phineas in the novel, it is the shared nature of the angel Phinehas in the Bible and the boy Phineas in Knowles's book that I wish to examine.

I do not think that it is stretching a point to say that Gene has come to believe that Phineas was his guardian angel. After Phineas has died Gene says "he [Phineas] was present in every moment of every day..." (p. 194). He at this point is convinced that his friend "Finny" has given him a standard of conduct and credo that will save him from the negative emotions created by a world at war. At the end of the novel as the Army Parachute Riggers school marches in to set up operations at Devon, Gene falls into step with their cadence count; however, he is really marching to the beat of a different drummer: "My feet of course could not help but begin to fall involuntarily into step with the coarse voice [of the drill sergeant]," but "down here [in his soul] I fell into step as well as my nature, Phineas filled, would allow" (p. 196). Although Gene will walk to the cadence that the world calls, he will also keep step to the credo of the good and guileless Finny, who like an angel was really too good to live in this world. As Gene declared earlier, speaking to Finny in the infirmary shortly after his fall down the marble steps, "You wouldn't be any good in the war, even if nothing had happened to your leg." What Gene means here is that Finny's spirit was naturally benevolent rather than bellicose; he adds, "They'd get you some place at the front and there'd be a lull in the fighting, and the next thing anyone knew you'd be over with the Germans or the Japs, asking them if they'd like to field a baseball team against our side....You'd get things so scrambled up nobody would know who to fight any more" (p. 182).

Finny shares numerous other angelic traits with his namesake. The angel Phinehas was remarkable for his compelling voice and his face with glowing features. Phineas is described in the early chapters in remarkably similar terms. Gene says of his voice, "It was the equivalent in sound of a hypnotist's eyes" (p. 6). And again, speaking of Finny—"He rambled on, his voice soaring and plunging in its vibrant sound box..." (p. 14). Describing Finny participating in class discussions, Gene says, "When he was forced to speak himself the hypnotic power of his voice combined with the singularity of his mind to produce an-

swers which were not often right but could rarely be branded as wrong" (p. 40). In addition to a remarkable voice, Finny's glowing green eyes light up his face. When excited his green eyes widen and he has a maniac look; we are told that his "eyes flash green across the room and that he blazed with sunburned health" (p. 14). In the longest description given of Finny's face Gene notes his friend's odd appearance: "Phineas had soaked and brushed his hair for the occasion. This gave his head a sleek look, which was contradicted by the surprised, honest expression which he wore on his face. His ears, I had never noticed before, were fairly small and set close to his head, and combined with his plastered hair they now gave his bold nose and cheekbones the sharp look of a prow" (p. 19).

When one reviews the peculiar physiognomy of Phineas as well as the suggestions raised by his hypnotic voice, vivid blue-green eyes (p. 39), and his extrasensory hearing (p. 11), it seems that the evidence of an angelic parallel is inescapable. Angels traditionally are endowed with supernatural and seeming magic powers of voice and eye which they use to enthrall their listeners; also, angels according to medieval lore have fine ears in order to hear the music of the spheres. Furthermore, the sleek, shiplike features of Phineas are in keeping with early Chrsitian angel iconography as is his skin, "which radiates a reddish copper glow" (p. 39). Finally, there is one more facet of analogy that pertains here. Angels, according to the doctrines of the early church, were immortal but not eternal. Also it was held that virtuous men could attain angelic rank. While no mention is made of Finny in the next world in *A Separate Peace,* it is apparent that he was an influence, if not necessarily a supernatural one, a nonetheless benevolent one who in the role of Gene's savior plays the part of an angel in deed as well as in name.

Whether Knowles intended for Phineas to be linked with precursors who bore this name in scripture, myth, and Christian legends of angels, it is not possible to say. However, it is a matter of record that Knowles writes to challenge the reader. In an essay entitled "The Young Writer's Real Friends," he says, "I think readers should work more. I don't want to imagine everything for them" (p. 12).[2] In the same essay he tries to answer critics who charged him with writing over-intellectualized novels and he refers directly to how he wrote *A Separate Peace:*

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[2] John Knowles, "The Young Writer's Real Friends," *The Writer,* 75 (July, 1962), 12-14.

> "...if anything as I wrote tempted me to insert intellectual complexities I ignored it. If anything appeared which looked suspiciously like a symbol, I left it on its own. I thought that if I wrote truly and deeply enough about certain people in a certain place at a particular time having a certain experience, then the result would be relevant to many other kinds of people and places and times and experiences....I know that if I began with symbols, I would end with nothing; if I began with certain individuals I might end up by creating symbols" (p. 13).

Thus it is that the names of both Gene and "Finny" are aptly chosen; whether by design or "a grace beyond the reach of art," they seem perfectly natural and inconspicuous names on the literal level and yet also function symbolically, focusing the theme of the novel even more clearly, if what is in the name is understood.[3]

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[3] Recently Fowles wrote a sequel to *A Separate Peace* entitled *Peace Breaks Out* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart & Winton, 1981). As the first novel was about the efforts of Devon students to deal with the pressures of a world at war, the second book shows another group of students trying to find a basis for life in the post-war world. The prep school is again a microcosm, as the nation having defeated external enemies now moves to destroying internal foes. Here the enemy is depicted as those who would corrupt the "Devon Spirit." The plot centers on the conflict between a boy named "Wexford," a nascent fascist type, and a boy named "Hochschwender," a disagreeable non-conformist. While the use of onomastic naming is not as central to Fowles's technique of characterization as in *A Separate Peace,* it is apparent that Wexford's name, which is Anglo-Irish, is indicative of the *growing* or "waxing" temper of intolerance in America towards those who are perceived as different and therefore dangerous. Hochschwender, on the other hand, is a German or Dutch name which indicates that he is a highly suspect person—a *Schuwender* or person subject to shunning. In fact, a group of boys led by Wexford go beyond this form of persecution and actually kill Hochschwender.

Where the use of name symbolism in *A Separate Peace* was understated and implied, here it is more obvious and events and characters are used in a schematic and predictable manner.