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Joy Qiu '16

Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy

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Joy Qiu

Mrs. Micklo

Literary Explorations I

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To Be a Friend: an Analysis of Phineas' Character

19th century poet Ralph Waldo Emerson famously observed that "the only way to have a friend is to be one." His statement suggests that friendship is a two-way street, requiring contributions and sacrifices from all members to qualify as a genuine bond. However, in *A Separate Peace*, by John Knowles, the relationship between Gene and Phineas demonstrates that Emerson's definition does not always hold true. As each boy struggles with his own inner turmoil and sense of identity on the brink of World War II, their friendship becomes unstable and incredibly one-sided – Gene constantly questions Phineas' motives, convinced that a much darker evil lurks beneath his best friend's amicable demeanor. Phineas, on the other hand, never wavers in his belief of Gene's loyalty and always goes above and beyond. For his honesty, supportiveness, and loyalty, Phineas is a good friend to Gene.

To begin, Phineas' honesty and sincerity towards Gene reveals that he is a true friend. Throughout the novel, Phineas is often portrayed as lighthearted or fun-loving, and thus incapable of handling the pressures of reality and taking things seriously. Yet despite his vulnerability, Phineas is unafraid to open up to his very best friend. In comparing the merit of tree-jumping with Gene's academic successes, he demands that Gene "be serious sometime, about something. If you're really good at something...then you've got to be serious about that" (Knowles 58). Though the two friends joke around, Phineas genuinely respects and values Gene's talents, and shows so through such sincere input. His uncensored criticism is without

malice – said not to harm, but simply to maintain a level of trust. The extent of his honesty, however, is not just limited to discussing mechanical interactions; Phineas is also frank in expressing his feelings. After a long night out on the beach, Phineas hesitantly confesses that Gene is his “best pal” (48), unmasking the most naked emotion he possesses: love. Even though Phineas faces potential rejection from Gene for such a weighty statement, he is willing to be so honest and take the risk for a person he genuinely cares about.

Not only does Phineas maintain an honest relationship; he actively supports Gene’s many endeavors as well – as a good friend should. Throughout the duration of their friendship, Phineas is incessantly pushing Gene forward, encouraging him to focus on academics and face his fears. As an insecure, developing teenager, Gene is heavily influenced by peer pressure and is uncomfortable standing out from his classmates. As soon as Phineas invents another game, Gene feels as if he must participate, even if the activity distracts from his number one priority: academics. When Phineas learns of his friend’s lack of self-control, he immediately steps in, telling Gene, “Don’t move from that desk. It’s going to be all A’s for you” (58). When considered shallowly, it may seem as if Phineas is discouraging Gene from having fun; in reality, Phineas is simply helping his best friend make the best decisions for his future. While this may result in tension between the two, Phineas is willing to put Gene’s interests before the friendship itself because he genuinely cares about him. This holds true in nonacademic activities as well. After leaping off of the branch for the very first time, Phineas and Gene bicker lightly over Gene’s impressive jump. While Gene denies having been shamed into the act, Phineas declares, “Oh yes I did [shame you into it]. I’m good for you that way. You have a tendency to back away from things otherwise” (18). As Phineas describes, he often puts Gene into uncomfortable

situations in order to broaden Gene's horizons and force him to face his fears. His support is unconventional, but undoubtedly makes Gene a worldlier person.

In addition to his supportiveness, Phineas' unwavering loyalty to Gene reflects the qualities of a good friend. Phineas is pure. Thus, he genuinely believes in the inherent goodness of each individual – especially with his best friend. This is reflected in Phineas' reaction to Gene's plans to enlist in the military. Gene, quite dumbfounded, observes: "Phineas was shocked at the idea of my leaving. In some way he needed me. He needed me" (108). Trust is the foundation of a good friendship. Phineas' shock is a result of the betrayal of this trust, and his expectation of trust from Gene illustrates his own loyalty towards his friend. However, this devotion is not only indicated by Gene's thoughts; Phineas' own words regarding his jumping accident reflect it as well. When Gene finally musters the courage to confess his evil actions to his best friend, Phineas will hear none of it. Amid Gene's feeble protests of "'Yes I did [cause you to fall off the tree]. I did! Of course I did,'" Phineas forcefully reiterates what he believes: "'Of course you didn't do it. You damn fool.'" (70). Even with his crippling injury, Phineas refuses to accept that the accident was anyone's fault (especially his best friend's) but his own, because his innocence blinds him from reality and prevents him from doubting others. This naïveté guarantees Phineas' devotion as a friend. Because of his loyalty, Phineas never questions Gene's actions, always believing his best friend to be as pure and genuine as he.

In John Knowles', *A Separate Peace*, Phineas' honesty, supportiveness, and loyalty demonstrate that he is a good friend to Gene. In both Gene's observations and his own words – regarding everything from doing homework to jumping off trees – Phineas epitomizes the qualities of a good friend. Through Phineas, whose loyalty to Gene transcends their petty conflicts, Knowles establishes the elements of a good friend. While every friendship may have

its flaws, it is ultimately defined by the investment of trust, the expression of honesty, and the sincerity of emotion between two people.

Works Cited

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Brainy Quote*. BookRags Media Network, 2013. Web. 24 Oct. 2013.

Knowles, John. *A Separate Peace*. New York: Scribner, 1959. Print.