

Historical Context

World War II began on September 1, 1939, when the German army invaded Poland. After occupying Poland, the Germans moved west, occupying the countries of Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Belgium, Norway, and France. By June 1940, only Great Britain held out against Hitler, and Italy joined the Axis powers. American involvement in World War II began in December 1941, when Japan executed a surprise attack on the United States military bases at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

The war ended in Europe on May 7, 1945, when Germany surrendered. Japanese forces did not surrender until atomic bombs were dropped on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On August 15, 1945, Japan finally surrendered, ending a war that killed millions of soldiers and citizens worldwide.

The extended flashback that constitutes *A Separate Peace* begins in the summer of 1942. The Axis forces were pushing ahead on every front. The Japanese invasion and occupation of the Philippines resulted in General Douglas MacArthur being driven out of the Islands and the Americans losing vital bases. U.S. troops on the Bataan peninsula surrendered, and many died as they were forced to march to their prisoner-of-war camps.

At home, America had instituted a "dimout" extending 15 miles inland from the Atlantic Coast because of the increase in German submarine, or "U-boat," sightings. German saboteurs were captured by the FBI after being landed by a U-boat on Long Island and Florida beaches. German submarines sank a large percentage of the merchant ships bound for British and Russian ports with supplies, foodstuffs, and men. August 22 marked the start of the Battle of Stalingrad, when German forces began a siege of the Russian city, attempting to starve out the defending forces. The population of Stalingrad dwindled from 500,000 to only 1,515 in the barbaric five-month battle.

The high unemployment of the depression years in America had fallen, as men and women found work in factories producing war-related goods. Rationing began; ration books were issued to the population and restrictions were instituted. Due to the shortage of crude rubber, which had been imported from the Far East and was now cut off by Japanese forces, tires for all vehicles were rationed. Gasoline was vital to run the machines of war and was rationed for the civilian population. Pleasure driving was banned and a 35-mile-per-hour speed limit was established on highways. Sugar and coffee

For Viewing

A Separate Peace starring John ...
and Parker ... VHS

For Listening

A Separate Peace Bantam ...
Dell, 1987.

Multimedia

Discovering Authors
(G. ... & Co.)

Discovering Authors
(Gale Research Inc.)

Masterpieces II CD-ROM
(Salem Press, Inc.)

Microsoft Encarta
1994 Multimedia Edition
(Microsoft Corporation)

CD Sourcebook
of American History
(Cambridge University Press)

World Wars: World War II
(Quanta Press Inc.)

were rationed after stockpiling resulted in shortages, and even milk deliveries were reduced. Produce became scarce as a result of American internment of Japanese Americans in the 1940s. Japanese Americans produced two thirds of the vegetable crop in California. Americans began to raise their own vegetables in "victory gardens" established in back yards and communal plots.

In the summer of 1942, Americans were beginning to realize that this war would not end soon, nor was there any certainty as to how it would end. The future would include hard work and shortages for the civilian population, and the test of battle and possible death for the military personnel.

Literary Context

A Separate Peace belongs to the genre of *Bildungsroman*. This is a German term that originated with Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1830), or, in English, *William Meister's Apprenticeship*.

Bildungsroman describes a novel whose main character matures over time, usually from childhood. Some examples of *Bildungsroman* include Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*, James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*.

Knowles based the writing of his novel on events that occurred during his summer at Exeter. This personal story is placed against the general background of World War II, a war that threatens his future and the futures of his classmates. From this melding of the personal and the global, Knowles has created a story in which the main character fights an inner battle with his destructive self within the larger theater of World War II.

Other works that deal with the issue of conflict in the context of boys becoming young men are J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. All three of these works portray struggles among schoolboys—both psychological conflicts and physical battles.

Like Gene in *A Separate Peace*, Holden Caulfield narrates the events in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Because the events of each novel are channeled through the

sensibilities of an angry teenage boy, the narrators are not completely reliable. While Gene's conflict is a mixture of reality and perceptions, Holden's conflict is psychological. In both cases, however, the reader must always keep in mind the filtering consciousness through which the story is presented.

Although written about elementary-school-age boys by a British author, *Lord of the Flies* presents issues central to the other two novels. The narrator in this novel is omniscient, and the story takes place during a nuclear war in the future. Published in 1954, *Lord of the Flies* pits civilized man against his savage self in the context of a totally destructive war. Perhaps the premise that there is no time left and that the future holds total annihilation causes the novel to be permeated with violence. There is more than one death in Golding's novel, and they are savage deaths which resolve nothing. The boys who become savage hunters of one another escalate the violence, and the civilized boys look to adults for help—adults who are themselves involved in a savage major conflict.

These novels portray the conflicts and illusions of adolescence. They encapsulate the sadness of leaving childhood, the pull of adulthood, and the ultimate confusion inherent in the passage from one stage to the other.