

How does Knowles powerfully present Gene's fear in this section of the novel?

In this extract, Knowles powerfully presents Gene's fear through the setting of the 'Butt Room' as well as by describing Gene's actions and thoughts. This extract is particularly powerful as it comes after Finny's fall and demonstrates just how much Gene has been affected by the event.

The extract begins with a description of the setting. The extreme description of a usually mundane room in the basement, reveals the extent of Gene's internal anxiety over his own actions. Gene describes the 'Butt Room' as 'something like a dungeon'. The use of this simile is interesting as it shows the extent to which Gene's mind has been affected by his actions towards Finny. In addition, the use of the word dungeon accurately reflects Gene's inner turmoil as it suggests he is in a dark place and is suffering. Furthermore, the use of 'dungeon' could also foreshadow what is to come later in the extract as he is treated almost like a prisoner when he is interrogated by the other boys. It is possible that Knowles uses this imagery to suggest that even though Gene has tried to block out or bury his guilt, he won't be successful as he is now venturing into his personal 'dungeon' and risks being exposed.

In addition to this, the furniture in the 'Butt Room' is described as being 'mutilated'. The fact that Gene chooses such aggressive language could represent the fear he has over Finny and the injury he has suffered. Knowles may be trying to suggest that Gene's fear over his actions have affected him as much as Finny's fall has affected him. As this description of the setting precedes the action later, it is clear that Knowles is trying to reflect the mood of Gene and the boy's through the dark and inhospitable setting.

As the extract progresses, we are able to see how Gene's panic manifests itself in his actions. In response to Brinker's grip on his neck Gene describes how 'With a snap of the neck I shook his hands off me, my teeth set.' This action shows not only how uncomfortable Gene is with the situation but also how defensive he feels. The word 'snap' suggests force and shows how violent his action is. It also reveals his paranoia and panic as he is trying to evade not only Brinker's grasp but also the forthcoming interrogation. This is further evidenced by Brinker's use of the word 'prisoner' which clearly makes Gene nervous. From this it is clear that Gene desperately feels the need to escape which is further demonstrated by the animalistic phrase 'my teeth set'. This phrase suggests he is preparing himself for a conflict and is becoming more defensive. In addition, this action is something we may see in an animal which is preparing to fight. Perhaps Knowles is trying to show the extent of Gene's fear as he is reverting to animalistic instincts as a means of self-defense. Gene's actions here are swift and forceful and would thereby create tension in the enclosed space. However, Knowles also skillfully places the reader in a state of suspense as we feel the conflict rising between both Brinker and Gene. In addition to showing Gene's defensiveness this action also reminds us just how young the boys are and highlights the type of adolescent conflict that can occur whilst at school.

John Knowles: *A Separate Peace*

Remember to support your ideas with details from the writing.

Read this extract, and then answer the question that follows it:

His hand fell leadenly on my shoulder. "Rest assured of that, my son. In our free democracy, even fighting for its life, the truth will out."

I got up. "I feel like a smoke, don't you? Let's go down to the Butt Room." "Yes, yes. To the dungeon with you."

The Butt Room was something like a dungeon. It was in the basement, or the bowels, of the dormitory. There were about ten smokers already there. Everyone at Devon had many public faces; in class we looked, if not exactly scholarly, at least respectably alert; on the playing fields we looked like innocent extroverts; and in the Butt Room we looked, very strongly, like criminals. The school's policy, in order to discourage smoking, was to make these rooms as depressing as possible. The windows near the ceiling were small and dirty, the old leather furniture spilled its inwards, the tables were mutilated, the walls ash-colored, the floor concrete. A radio with a faulty connection played loud and rasping for a while, then suddenly quiet and insinuating.

"Here's your prisoner, gentlemen," announced Brinker, seizing my neck and pushing me into the Butt Room ahead of him, "I'm turning him over to the proper authorities."

High spirits came hard in the haze of the Butt Room. A slumped figure near the radio, which happened to be playing loud at the moment, finally roused himself to say, "What's the charge?"

"Doing away with his roommate so he could have a whole room to himself. Rankest treachery." He paused impressively. "Practically fratricide."

With a snap of the neck I shook his hand off me, my teeth set, "Brinker ..."

He raised an arresting hand. "Not a word. Not a sound. You'll have your day in court."

"God damn it! Shut up! I swear to God you ride a joke longer than anybody I know."

It was a mistake; the radio had suddenly gone quiet, and my voice ringing in the abrupt, releasing hush galvanized them all.

"So, you killed him, did you?" A boy uncoiled tensely from the couch.

"Well," Brinker qualified judiciously, "not actually killed. Finny's hanging between life and death at home, in the arms of his grief-stricken old mother."

I had to take part in this, or risk losing control completely. “I didn’t do hardly a thing,” I began as easily as it was possible for me to do, “I—all I did was drop a little bit ... a little pinch of arsenic in his morning coffee.”

“Liar!” Brinker glowered at me. “Trying to weasel out of it with a false confession, eh?” I laughed at that, laughed uncontrollably for a moment at that.

“We know the scene of the crime,” Brinker went on, “high in that ... that funereal tree by the river. There wasn’t any poison, nothing as subtle as that.”

“Oh, you know about the tree,” I tried to let my face fall guiltily, but it felt instead as though it were being dragged downward. “Yes, huh, yes there was a small, a little contretemps at the tree.”

No one was diverted from the issue by this try at a funny French pronunciation.

“Tell us everything,” a younger boy at the table said huskily. There was an unsettling current in his voice, a genuinely conspiratorial note, as though he believed literally everything that had been said. His attitude seemed to me almost obscene, the attitude of someone who discovers a sexual secret of yours and promises not to tell a soul if you will describe it in detail to him.

“Well,” I replied in a stronger voice, “first I stole all his money. Then I found that he cheated on his entrance tests to Devon and I blackmailed his parents about that, then I made love to his sister in Mr. Ludsbury’s study, then I ...” it was going well, faint grins were appearing around the room, even the younger boy seemed to suspect that he was being “sincere” about a joke, a bad mistake to make at Devon, “then I ...” I only had to add, “pushed him out of the tree” and the chain of implausibility would be complete, “then I ...” just those few words and perhaps this dungeon nightmare would end.

But I could feel my throat closing on them; I could never say them, never.

I swung on the younger boy. “What did I do then?” I demanded. “I’ll bet you’ve got a lot of theories. Come on, reconstruct the crime. There we were at the tree. Then what happened, Sherlock Holmes?”

His eyes swung guiltily back and forth. “Then you just pushed him off, I’ll bet.”

“Lousy bet,” I said offhandedly, falling into a chair as though losing interest in the game. “You lose. I guess you’re Dr. Watson, after all.”

They laughed at him a little, and he squirmed and looked guiltier than ever. He had a very weak foothold among the Butt Room crowd, and I had pretty well pushed him off it. His glance flickered out at me from his defeat, and I saw to my surprise that I had, by making a little fun of him, brought upon myself his unmixed hatred. For my escape this was a price I was willing to pay.

How does Knowles convey Gene’s fear at this moment in the novel? (25 marks)