

*Dead Poets Society*

## 1. How are students portrayed throughout the movie?

The students in *Dead Poets Society* are portrayed as obedient, reserved, and disciplined when they interact with their parents and school faculty like the headmaster, but when they interact with one another and Mr. Keating, the boys show their individual personalities, interests, and hobbies. The students are respectful because the school and their upbringing are strict and this forces the boys to conform to the expectations of a prestigious school such as Welton Academy. After the arrival of John Keating, the boys take more risks (*Carpe Diem!*) rather than conforming to the traditions of the Academy and this makes the boys seem rebellious and unruly in the eyes of the school leaders, such as Mr. Nolan, who believes schooling is only about preparing the gentlemen for college and not encouraging them to try new things, think for themselves, and add their verses to life's poem. The boys are also portrayed as intelligent youth in the prime of their lives, who are restrained and held back from unleashing their talents, passions, and interests for fear of disappointing their disapproving parents as well as giving the school a bad reputation that may fall back on themselves.

## 2. How are adults viewed by students?

All of the adults in the movie except for Mr. Keating are viewed as unsupportive, strict, almost careless, and unnecessarily harsh in the eyes of the students. The "old school" and orthodox teachers maintain extremely high expectations for the boys and refuse to accept late work or reasonable excuses for assignments without hefty punishments. Mr. Nolan is one of the prominent figures at Welton Academy whose focus is on keeping the school in high regard with parents who pay for their sons to attend, rather than emphasizing the interests of the students and allowing them time to grow and interact as boys should. Welton Academy would have the motto of, "All work and no play," if John Keating had not interjected and changed things around for a brief period of time. Another adult figure that is held in a negative light throughout the movie is Neil's father. Neil's father keeps his son's extracurricular interests at bay and refuses to acknowledge or let Neil voice his opinion about his father's treatment of his son's acting interest. The father always accuses Neil of making his parents look terrible and throws the guilty card at Neil by saying that they "sacrificed" quite a lot to allow him to attend the Academy to become something better than them in the long run. The restrictive nature of his parents ultimately pushes Neil to take his own life when they decide how he will live it without allowing for his own individual input in his future.

In contrast, Mr. Keating is portrayed and viewed as a better fatherly figure and teacher than any of the other adults in the movie. John Keating is viewed as a role model by the boys in his class and interacts with them as a friend rather than a strict and intimidating superior. Mr. Keating jokes with the students in an effort to engage

them with the material and inspires them to write their own stories, seize the day, take chances, discover themselves, and think independently. Mr. Keating pushes the boys out of their comfort zones to discover themselves rather than trying to maintain conformity and shape each in the same mold of tradition. The students look up to, respect, and admire Keating's outgoing and different approach to teaching, which is evident when they seek his advice outside of class and support him at the end even after he has been dismissed from Welton.

3. Where and how is student voice engaged?

The students' voices are engaged when Keating forces them to speak up in class, specifically Todd, who is terrified of public speaking, but who gains some confidence when his teacher encourages him to bring the poetry from within out into the open spontaneously. Mr. Keating's break-through moment with Todd foreshadows his outspoken manner at the end of the movie when he defies Mr. Nolan and shows support for Captain Keating. The closing moments of the movie reveals the progress Keating has made with the boys when their voices and actions are seen and heard by Mr. Nolan and reflects their devotion and dedication to the teacher who transformed their outlooks on life and living to the fullest. Similarly, Keating pushes and engages the boys by combining poetry reading with sports to help the students break out of their quiet shells. The boys' voices are also engaged when they show support for Neil at the play and support one another after his tragic death.

4. How do changes in the immediate situation affect the whole school?

The changes in the immediate situation affect the whole school by impacting the boys' actions and attitudes beginning when Mr. Keating arrives and again when Neil takes his own life. Mr. Keating's arrival and motivation influences the students' actions in a positive manner by their increase in learning, revival of the Dead Poets Society of Keating's day, and risk-taking, you-only-live-once, carpe diem attitude. The boys interact more inside and outside of class once Keating encourages them and reinforces the importance of making the most of the life one is given alongside the English curriculum. Keating's unique style of teaching is more concerned with the wellbeing, interests, and individuality of the students rather than their ability to quote Shakespeare or Tennyson word-for-word. While the movie focuses on a select group of boys in John Keating's English class, the influence of Keating pervades the Academy and adds color and excitement to the usually dull and strict school.

The whole school is also affected by drastic and tragic changes when Neil Perry commits suicide after his father is adamant concerning Neil no longer participating in theatre and tells his son he will be removed from the Academy and attend military school, and then Harvard to become a doctor. Neil is not allowed to "talk back" or voice his thoughts to his father, therefore, he takes his own life to escape the stifling pressure of his parents and make his own decision for once in his life. After Neil's

death, the entire school is impacted and the school officials blame the Dead Poets Society, ultimately leading to the dismissal of Mr. Keating, even though the boys started the club on their own will. Keating's alternative teaching approaches and interest in the boys' individuality and wellbeing outside of academic content strayed from the traditional approaches of Welton Academy and needed to be recovered in a professional fashion to maintain the school's "integrity." When Mr. Keating returns to collect his belongings, the boys defy Mr. Nolan and stand atop their desks in a final salute to the Captain who was punished for a tragic event he had no hand in. Overall, the dismissal of Keating may remove his influence from the boys for the rest of their secondary education, but the school officials cannot take away the life lessons and truth he already bestowed upon the students in such a short amount of time.

5. What is the role of culture & society in the story?

Society and culture in *Dead Poets Society* are portrayed as complimenting one another based on the fact that the boys are molded by a culture and background of high expectations that limits their creativity and free will. The social and cultural expectations throughout the movie align with Welton Academy's prim and proper attitude towards education as well as the parents' demand that their children attend the best classes, school, and Ivy League colleges with little to no thought as to what the child believes is best or what he may actually want to pursue. The strict educational environment and cultural expectations discourage and punish individuality, believing that both are doing what is best for the students and their futures. The boys are expected to meet the expectations of the school, their families, and society by staying obedient, following the rules, taking responsibility for their actions, acknowledging their inferior place in the classroom with strict teachers, and conforming to the educated, disciplined mold Welton has been replicating for years. Mr. Keating does not believe in the traditional mold of just preparing the boys for college; Keating goes against the grain by rejecting and avoiding conformity by inspiring the boys to find themselves and who they truly are, rather than helping them obtain a high school diploma and moving on to the next class. The restrictive nature of the institutions and parental expectations reminds me of a quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who is closely associated with Henry David Thoreau that is mentioned throughout the movie, "To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment." Mr. Keating encourages his students to be themselves and make their own decisions rather than accepting a decision that someone else has made on their behalf that only reflects the demands of the society and culture in which they live.

6. What is the role of student differences (discuss those that are applicable to the story - gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, poverty, race, ethnicity, family, religion, etc.)

The student differences in the story, such as socioeconomic status and family, contribute to the boys' actions, attitudes, and relationships with one another. The socioeconomic status of the students attending Welton Academy, which is a selective and prestigious boys boarding school with a white majority, reveals that the majority of the students come from wealthy backgrounds and families who have high expectations. Although the students receive great opportunities from attending the Academy, the socioeconomic status and money their parents pay does not guarantee the boys' happiness or encourage anything for leisure, only making A's the parents expect and demand. Neil is repeatedly reprimanded by his father, who never fails to mention the sacrifices the parents made to allow him to attend the Academy, and who never allows his son to speak openly or voice his opinions claiming it is "back talk." The different socioeconomic status of Neil compared to the other boys causes more pressure to be placed on him and his actions become more heavy and restricted until the end when he takes his own life to lift the burdens that have been repeatedly placed on his shoulders throughout the story.

Similarly, Todd's family name and status places him at a different academic level compared to the other boys because of his brother's success at the Academy. The family reputation and academic success gives Todd big shoes to fill since his brother performed well and the teachers expect the same of Todd. Todd is somewhat isolated in the story because of his fear of public speaking and quiet manner, but partially overcomes his fear with the help of Mr. Keating. The outgoing abilities of some of the boys, such as Knox, give them advantages over more reserved students, like Todd, but ultimately all the students receive equal attention and support from Mr. Keating. Mr. Keating is not concerned with the financial status, familial expectations, or last names of the boys; he is focused on their personal, emotional, academic, and individual development while they are in his class.

7. What is the role of teacher effectiveness to the story?

Teacher effectiveness is extremely important in *Dead Poets Society* because Mr. Keating goes beyond the content and classroom to help the boys discover who they are and what they are capable of doing. Mr. Keating is a highly effective teacher and this is evident in the boys' respect and admiration for "Mr. K." The students do not have the same outgoing, energized attitude in Latin or Science class that they have in English when Mr. Keating is teaching. Keating uses humor to engage and connect to the students and the students pay attention to him because he is different and more expressive than the other instructors at the Academy. Mr. Keating influences the camaraderie between the boys when they revive the Dead Poets Society and he interacts with the boys on an equivalent level rather than dividing the classroom between the superior teacher and the inferior students. The boys may not appear to absorb the lessons while in class, but it is evident that Keating's teaching is effective when they delve into poetry on their own accord and adopt the motto of "Carpe Diem" throughout the story.

8. Relevance to this class and/or class discussions

The themes and teacher-student interaction in *Dead Poets Society* are relevant to this class and past discussion topics by reinforcing the importance of engaging students on academic and personal levels, using humor as a connecting force in the classroom, combining life lessons with academic content, and being a supportive figure in the life of a student when they may have no one else. Mr. Keating engages the students on academic and personal levels by having a stake in their wellbeing and using poetry to inspire their individuality and risk-taking. The dual engagement is relevant to this class and the education field overall because a teacher cannot just cover the required content without addressing its relevance and importance in the lives of the students who are learning it. When the students get in trouble for publishing information about the Dead Poets Society, Mr. Keating does not scold them, but shows personal concern for their futures and wellbeing. Similarly, Keating is a supportive figure in the lives of his students, specifically Neil, who seeks Keating's advice about acting in the play and how to explain his reasoning to his father. Mr. Keating steps away from the superior role of teacher and becomes a friend and supportive pillar when his students seek guidance outside of the classroom. The actions, investment, and relationship between Keating and his students echoes the lesson and realization of Nel Noddings, "When you teach kids for several years, you take on *responsibility* not only for their academic growth but for their growth as whole human beings" (p. 27).

The humor in the movie is also relevant to this class because it is used as a connecting force in the classroom as Ms. Codell uses it in Chapter Six of *The Teacher in American Society*. Mr. Keating uses jokes, humor, and references to popular culture to engage the students, surprise them, and encourage them to pay attention to what he is saying. The humor Keating uses does not degrade or embarrass the students, but puts them at ease from the uptight nature of the other teachers and classes. At the beginning of the movie, the students are not sure what to think about Mr. Keating's unusual teaching approaches, such as his whistling, ripping out the introduction to the textbook, and his lessons that incorporate philosophical elements and poetry. The boys are accustomed to joking with one another as growing teenagers do, therefore, Keating's use of humor captures their attention and influences their actions outside of class.

9. Applicability to your life

The themes and teacher portrayal in *Dead Poets Society* encourages me to strive to teach like John Keating and influence my students to be themselves even when society looks upon every aspect of our lives with a judgmental eye. Since I am an English major, the literary topics and life lessons Mr. Keating combined really hit home and showed me that I can use my content area and expertise to connect to my

students in a variety of ways. I love the way Mr. Keating would quote poetry from memory, then explain and justify its importance in the lives of his students. I think Mr. Keating is a prime example of an effective teacher and the qualities an effective teacher possesses, such as being caring, supportive, making investments, maintaining positivity, and connecting and interacting with students, among other things.

*Dead Poets Society* is also applicable to my life as an individual because Keating's message of "Carpe Diem or Seize the day!" is inspiring and encourages me to stop worrying about trivial things so much and take chances, live to the fullest, and not live by past regrets or "what ifs." I think Keating's message of resisting conformity is also extremely relevant to our society because quite often we side with the majority when we are afraid to be different and this limits our opportunities to express who we are as unique individuals. I believe we should all strive to make the most out of life even when it seems to be working against us the majority of the time. To quote Henry David Thoreau, "You must live in the present, launch yourself on every wave, find your eternity in each moment." We have survived the past, but we are not guaranteed a future, so we must seize the day and take the chances that we are given now before it is too late.