

# Dead Poets Society

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Pd.: \_\_\_\_\_

## To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time

by Robert Herrick

GATHER ye rosebuds while ye may,  
Old time is still a-flying:  
And this same flower that smiles to-day  
To-morrow will be dying.

The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun,  
The higher he's a-getting,  
The sooner will his race be run,  
And nearer he's to setting.

That age is best which is the first,  
When youth and blood are warmer;  
But being spent, the worse, and worst  
Times still succeed the former.

Then be not coy, but use your time,  
And while ye may go marry:  
For having lost but once your prime  
You may for ever tarry.



Botticelli. 'Three Graces' detail from 'Primavera' 1481.



**Study Guide Questions:** Answer the following questions thoroughly on your own paper!

(Beginning of movie to the end of Mr. Keating's "O me! O life!" speech – approx. 32 min.)

- Where and when is this story set?
- What are the four pillars of Welton Academy?      What do the students say they are?  
T—      T—  
H—      H—  
E—      E—  
D—      D—
- Notice the short scene with the flock of birds. What might this scene symbolize?
- What does the Latin phrase *carpe diem* mean?
- What is the point of Mr. Keating's first class with the boys?
- According to Mr. Keating, why read poetry?
- Why does he have them rip pages out of their books?



(First dinner scene to students standing on Mr. Keating's desk—approx. 20 minutes)

8. What was the Dead Poets Society? What did they do? Where do you think the name comes from?
9. What is the symbolism in the scene where the boys go to the cave? Think about the cave itself, the setting in the woods, the flashlights, etc.)
10. How does Mr. Keating get the boys to look at life differently? What specific techniques or methods does he use?
11. What does T.S. Eliot mean by the following quote?

"No poet, no artist of any art, has complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation, is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead."

-- T. S. Eliot, from "Tradition and the Individual Talent"

12. Summarize, in your own words, why Henry David Thoreau went to the woods:

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what is not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God. . . ."

--Henry David Thoreau, from *Walden*



(From Neil's desire to act to Charlie's punishment—approx. 35 minutes)

13. What is Mr. Keating's philosophy of sports?
14. What is it that makes Todd come out of his shell? What does Mr. Keating do to help him come out of his shell?
15. Notice the music involved in the film (Handel, Beethoven). Why do you think this type of music was chosen?
16. Discuss the poems used in the film so far (Shakespeare's sonnets, Robert Frost, Walt Whitman, Thoreau, etc.). What significance do the poems have on the storyline? Why do you think certain poems were chosen over others?
17. Professor Keating uses the following quote from Walt Whitman to inspire his students earlier in the film:

O Me! O life! . . . of the questions of these recurring;  
Of the endless trains of the faithless—of cities fill'd with the foolish;  
Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more faithless?)  
Of eyes that vainly crave the light—of the objects mean—of the struggle ever renew'd;  
Of the poor results of all—of the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me;  
Of the empty and useless years of the rest—with the rest me intertwined;  
The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?

*Answer.*

That you are here—that life exists, and identity;  
That the powerful play goes on, and you will contribute a verse.

Why do you think Professor Keating tells his students to “contribute a verse?” What does he mean? What do you think will be your ‘verse’ to the world?



(Mr. Keating's meeting with Nolan to Knox's talk with Chris—approx. 19 minutes)

Answer each question thoroughly—use at least three reasons to support each of your arguments:

18. Do you think Charlie is too daring? Why or why not?
19. Do you think Mr. Keating is a bad influence? Why or why not?
20. What does Mr. Keating do well as a leader? What are his downfalls as a leader?
21. Keating provokes defiance into his students without providing the social discourse (or, in other words, something to try and change) for true change. What is the effect of this when the students act on their defiance?



(The rest of the movie –approx. 30 minutes)

22. Who is most to blame for Neil's death? Mr. Keating? Neil's father? Neil himself?
23. Do you think Neil would have committed suicide if Mr. Keating had never come into his life? Why or why not?
24. Who, do you think, was the bravest of all the Dead Poets boys? Why?
25. In the initial screenplay, Todd specifically does not sign the paper at the end. In the movie, we are not told one way or the other. Did Todd sign it or not? What do you think?
26. What happens next? What does the future hold for Keating and the boys?
27. Comment on each of the themes below—which theme were you most able to relate to? Which did you think was the most powerful?
  - Feelings of alienation
  - Dealing with increased feelings of independence and rebellion
  - Academic pressure
  - Symbolism and imagery
  - Influence of role models
28. How has this movie helped you to think differently about poetry, teaching, school, alienation, etc. Pick one thing and focus on it.
29. Which piece of poetry used in the film did you like best and why? Why did it stand out to you?

## Post-Viewing Activities

Read "O Captain, My Captain" and "To the Virgins to Make Much of Time" (below). Discuss what each of these poems means, and then draw connections between them and the movie. Write your opinions in two short paragraphs, one paragraph for each poem.

### **O Captain! My Captain!**

*Walt Whitman*

O CAPTAIN! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,  
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won,  
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,  
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;  
But O heart! heart! heart!  
O the bleeding drops of red,  
Where on the deck my Captain lies,  
Fallen cold and dead.

O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;  
Rise up - for you the flag is flung - for you the bugle trills,  
For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths - for you the shores  
a-crowding,  
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;  
Here Captain! dear father!  
This arm beneath your head!  
It is some dream that on the deck,  
You've fallen cold and dead.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,  
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,  
The ship is anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,  
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;  
Exult O shores, and ring O bells!  
But I with mournful tread,  
Walk the deck my Captain lies,  
Fallen cold and dead.

**Notes : SSTV and connections to film—**

## “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time”

Robert Herrick

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,  
Old Time is still a-flying;  
And this same flower that smiles today  
Tomorrow will be dying.

The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun,  
The higher he's a-getting,  
The sooner will his race be run,  
And nearer he's to setting.

That age is best which is the first,  
When youth and blood are warmer;  
But being spent, the worse, and worst  
Times still succeed the former.

Then be not coy, but use your time,  
And while ye may, go marry;  
For having lost but once your prime,  
You may forever tarry.

**Notes : SSTV and connections to film—**

**What does this film have to say about—**

1. Conformity?
2. Following and leading?
3. One's passion and life?
4. Creativity?
5. Daring and caution?
6. Looking at life from different perspectives?
7. *Carpe Diem*?

**Follow Up Character Questions:**

1. In your opinion, which character is transformed the most through his experiences in the film? Explain and support your argument with specific proof.
2. Which characters are static in nature, meaning they do not change in the film. Explain your reasoning.
3. What kind of character is Mr. Keating? Is he changed by his experience in the film? Why or why not?
4. All the major characters of the film have personal fears to overcome. This is especially true of Todd Anderson, Neil Perry, Knox Overstreet, and Charlie (Nwanda) Dalton. Describe each character's major traits and the fear that affects him. Utilize what you have already written in previous questions about this character, but keep focused on the topic. Determine whether or not he overcomes this fear—and if so, how and why he did. If he failed to overcome it, explain how and why he failed.

### **Theme:**

As the film progresses, it becomes readily apparent that each primary character faces a challenge. These conflicts help suggest a theme, or central message, that the author and director are trying to impart to the audience.

What do you consider to be *Dead Poets Society's* central theme? Explain with examples in a well-developed paragraph of at least 200 words.

### **Questions for Individual and Team Responses:**

1. Would Neil still have committed suicide if Mr. Keating had never come into his life? Consider multiple perspectives here as you draft your group response.
2. Who was really the bravest of Keating's boys? Who was a coward? Be explicit and support your answers.
3. How did the poetry book make it into Neil's room? (Did Keating put it there?) And if so, why, after telling the boys that the present administration would not look favourably on it, would Keating do that?

### **Reading Journal Responses:**

1. Who is the most influential leader you have ever had? Why did he or she have such an influence on you?
2. "We don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. And medicine, law, business, engineering; these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love; these are what we stay alive for." Professor John Keating says this—what do you think it means? Do you agree? What are your views on poetry and why we read it?
3. "I stand upon my desk to remind myself that we must constantly look at things in a different way. The world looks very different up here... Just when you think you know something you have to look at it in another way... When you read, don't just consider what the author thinks, you must consider what you think." Comment on this quote from Professor Keating. Do you agree? Why or why not? Do you have a personal story about a time you took another perspective?
4. Keating asks his students to consider what their 'verse,' or lasting impression, will be when they leave either Welton or this world. What 'verse' will you contribute in your lifetime? What do you hope will be the lasting impression you leave behind?

Source: <http://stirling10.wordpress.com/film-studies/dead-poets-society-discussion-questions/>

*Dead Poets Society* screenplay/script: [http://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/dead\\_poets\\_final.html](http://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/dead_poets_final.html)

## Characters in *Dead Poets Society*

Describe each of the characters listed below, focusing on personality traits and each one's role in the movie.

Character	Character's Personality in a Nutshell (two adjectives)	Other Character Traits and Roles (purposes each character fulfills in the movie)
Neil Perry		
John Keating		
Todd Anderson		
Knox Overstreet		
Charlie Dalton (a.k.a. Nwanda)		
Steven Meeks		
Gerard Pitts		
Richard Cameron		
Mr. Perry		
Mrs. Perry		
Mr. McAllister (Latin teacher)		
Mr. Nolan (Dean of Welton)		
Chris Noel		
Chet Danburry		

## Character Relationships in *Dead Poets Society*

Many characters within this movie have either a primary good or difficult relationship with another character or characters. The bond between characters brings out something within the other character/s that radically affects their relationship. In the space provided, describe how each pair of characters have affected one another in either a positive or negative way—be sure to support your conclusions with specific details.

<b>Keating—McAllister</b>	
<b>Todd—Neil</b>	
<b>Keating—Neil</b>	
<b>Keating--Nolan</b>	
<b>Cameron—DPS boys</b>	
<b>Keating—Pitts</b>	
<b>Meeks—Pitts</b>	
<b>Keating—Charlie (Nwanda)</b>	
<b>Neil—Mr. Perry</b>	



## **Symbolism in *Dead Poets Society***

A symbol is a person, place, thing, or event that comes to represent an abstract idea or concept, anything that stands for something beyond itself, like *flag* for *country* or *autumn* for *maturity*. Careful readers/viewers keep their eyes open to recognize the symbolic nature of these images, often through their recurrence throughout the work of art. Then they infer the symbols' inherent meanings. As with any interpretation and analysis, the reader must be able to support any inferences with specific details from the work. Make solid connections between the image and what it symbolizes, and explain how you made those connections.

*Think especially about what is happening in the scene where each symbol occurs.* Build your answer by establishing a context (i.e., when and where it appears in the film) and then interpreting the deeper levels of meaning.

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Significance and Support</b>
Four Pillars of Welton Academy	
Single candle burning at the beginning of the movie	
The candle ceremony at the opening convocation	
Birds rising up into the air	
Owl	
Standing and jumping off the desks	
"Radio Free America"	
snow	
Crown of thorns	
Open window	
Vomit in the snow	

## Scene Parallels in *Dead Poets Society*

When making a film, directors must maintain a constant watch on the budget. Every scene that makes it through the final cut, therefore, must carry significance to the movie as a whole, or it wastes time and money. Consider the compression aspect of poetry—every word must count or it can detract from the poem as a whole. In the same way, every film scene must serve an important purpose within the movie. (Think about “uncut” or “director’s cut” versions of a movie. Producers charge much more for sweeping scenes off the cutting room floor and stuffing them back into a “special edition” DVD. More often than not, though, it’s pretty easy to understand why they were cut in the first place.)

In the case of *Dead Poets Society*, the director masterfully creates significance by juxtaposing different scenes. By doing so, he is able to elaborate on characters, settings, or symbols, magnifying their significance. Below is a list of scenes from the movie. Describe each scene in its particular box, and then draw connections between each pair of scenes underneath. What comments does the director make with them? What significance does he lend them by placing them near each other? ***Extra Credit: Can you think of any other juxtaposed pairs of scenes? List them!***

<b>Keating in the courtyard at Welton</b>	<b>McAlister in the courtyard at Welton</b>
Connections/effects of the juxtaposition:	
<b>Birds on first day of school</b>	<b>Staircase at school</b>
Connections/effects of the juxtaposition:	
<b>Keating teaching on first day</b>	<b>Glimpses of other teachers in their classrooms</b>
Connections/effects of the juxtaposition:	
<b>Cave</b>	<b>Party</b>
Connections/effects of the juxtaposition:	
<b>Desk set on top of building</b>	<b>Desk set in Mr. Perry’s home office</b>
Connections/effects of the juxtaposition:	

*Sources used for this packet include insightful analytical questions and approaches from Nick Senger, Carly Palacios, and Mr. Vasquez.*