

Dead Poets Society Study Guide

Dead Poets Society by N.H. Kleinbaum

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Plot Summary

“Dead Poets Society” is the story about a group of junior year boys at the Welton Academy, an exclusive private school for boys. The story unfolds during the opening ceremony for the new school year. The indoctrination is held in the school’s chapel. To the melodious sound of bagpipe music, four boys enter the chapel carrying banners. Each banner is inscribed with a word representing what the school stands for: Honor, Discipline, Excellence and Tradition. Parents seating in the pews are smiling, excited and proud of their sons.

Todd Anderson is a new student that year. He suffers from low self-esteem brought on by the outstanding academic performance of his older brother, Jeffrey, who was also a student at Welton. Todd feels, with good reason, that his parents favor Jeffrey and that he is little more than an afterthought. The Dean is less than tactful when he reminds Todd that he has big shoes to fill. Just what Todd needed to hear! Neil Perry welcomes Todd as his new roommate. Neil is a positive young boy whose domineering father has a future all planned out for Neil, but it’s not the future that Neil wants.

The conservative private school is steeped in tradition. But that tradition is about to have a huge challenge from one of its former students. John Keating has been hired by the school to become the new English teacher. He was a brilliant student, natural leader and a Rhodes Scholar. John always marched to the beat of a different drummer, a trait of the very bright.

John Keating basically turns aside the school’s curriculum and teaches the boys about poetry and life. He reads the poetry he loves and explains to the boys how it applies to real life. He encourages them to abandon tradition and be non-conformists and free spirits. A fellow teacher warns Keating that he may be setting the boys up for disappointment because not everyone can be an artist. Keating tells the teacher he missed the point. He is not telling the boys to be artists but to be free thinkers.

When the boys find out that Mr. Keating had formed a secret club called the Dead Poets Society when he was a student at Welton, they want to know all about it. Keating tells them that he and his friends established the club and that only dead poets could be members. Keating and his friends were just pledges. They met in a cave and read poetry, created gods and vowed to suck the marrow out of life. The boys are inspired to revamp the club and begin meeting in the same cave as Keating and his peers did years before.

When the school administration gets wind of the secret club – something that is against regulations – the dean promises to suspend any student who is a member. The dean is beginning to regret that he hired Keating because of his unorthodox way of teaching. He fears that it can come to no good end. When tragedy strikes, Keating is the perfect fall guy on which to place the blame. Keating is terminated over the incident. On his last day as the boys shout that Keating wasn’t to blame, the boys all stand on their desks in solidarity with him.

Chapters 1 - 4

Summary

In the stone chapel on the Welton Academy campus, 300 boys sit on either side of the aisle as a procession led by an old man in a flowing robe and carrying a candle followed by four students carrying banners pass by. Each banner has one word written across it: Honor, Discipline, Excellence and Tradition. There is bagpipe music playing and proud parents sit in the pews watching the proceeding.

Headmaster Gale Nolan welcomes everyone and indicates that the old man who is lighting the unlit candles of boys sitting in the front row is passing the “light of knowledge.” It was 1959 and the 100th year since the school’s establishment. Sixteen-year-old Todd Anderson stands and volunteers the four pillars of the school: Honor, Discipline, Excellence and Tradition. The success of the new boys depends on adhering to those four pillars. Nolan has four older students stand and explain each of the four pillars. Neil Perry is conscious of the achievement pin on his blazer.

Nolan introduces John Keating who is the new English teacher. He had come from a teaching position in London. In concluding the welcoming ceremony, Nolan calls on the oldest living graduated, Alexander Carmichael, Jr., from the class of 1886 to speak. He slowly makes his way to the podium and mumbles a few words that no one can understand. After the ceremony, Dean Nolan says goodbye to the parents and gives them a few words of encouragement about their son’s school year. He tells Todd Anderson that he has big shoes to fill. His brother was one of their best students. As parents drive away, one boy screams that he wants to go home.

The juniors gather in the Academy Honor room waiting for their turn for their sessions with Dean Nolan. Todd Anderson is called in with four other boys. Pitts wants to know who the new boy is. Meeks whispers that his names is Anderson. Dean Nolan explains to Todd that extra-curricular activities are assigned on merit and desire. Based on his record, Todd is assigned to the soccer team, Service Club and the school annual. Todd responds that he would prefer to be on the rowing team. Dean Nolan thinks he’ll like soccer just fine.

Neil Perry introduces himself to Todd. They will be roommates. Neil tells him not to expect to like it at Welton. Todd says he already doesn’t like it. Todd and Neil find their room. Other boys – Richard Cameron, Knox Overstreet, Charlie Dalton and Steven Meeks stop by to chat and introduce themselves to Todd. They had all heard of his brother, Jeffrey Anderson who was valedictorian and a National Merit Scholar. There’s a knock on the door. It’s Neil’s father.

Mr. Perry had just met with Dean Nolan. He was afraid that Neil was taking on too many extra-curricular activities and had him eliminating working on the school annual. Neil isn’t pleased – he’s the assistant editor! They step out in the hall. Mr. Perry scolds Neil

for disputing him in front of the other boys. Neil apologizes and promises to trust his father's decision. Knox and Charlie tells Neil he should do what he wants. His father is always against anything he wants to do. Neil reminds them that they hop to for their parents, too. He rips an achievement pin from the breast pocket of his blazer and hurls it at his desk.

Todd unpacks photos of his parents, his famous brother and a family photo. Neil notices that Todd stands slightly apart from the rest of the family. Todd tells Neil he'd take his father over his own but doesn't elaborate. Neil picks up the achievement pin and pokes his thumb with it, drawing blood, then hurls the pin across the room.

The boys are dismayed with the amount of homework they get in Latin, History and Math. Next is English with the new teacher, Mr. Keating. Keating is gazing out of the window as the boys file in. He walks in front of the class and then hops atop his desk to face them, reciting, "O Captain! My Captain!" He tells the boys that it's from a poem by Walt Whitman about Abraham Lincoln. The boys can call him Mr. Keating or "O Captain! My Captain!" He tells the boys that he was a student many years before although he did not have the sparkling personality that he does now. If anyone emulates his personality, he'll give them extra grade points.

Mr. Keating moves the class to the Honor Room where they can stretch out. He has Pitts read a poem, "The Make Much of Time" from the text book. The poem contains the Latin phrase, "Carpet Diem." Mr. Keating asks the boys what that means. Meeks responds that it means, "Seize the day." Keating says that the poet means that we are food for worms and we only have a limited amount of time. He invites the boys to look at photos that line the walls of students from decades before. Their faces are just as bright and hopeful as the students' are. How many waited too long to do what they were capable of doing?! The boys think that Keating is weird but different. They were fairly certain there would be no test in English the next day. That evening, Todd looks at his notes from that day and sees the phrase "seize the day." How, he wonders.

Analysis

The banners that the boys display during the opening ceremony for the first day of school are symbolic of the fundamental values of the school. They are also symbolic of the conservative and stern environment of the school, planting a seed that traditions may well be challenged. An old man who leads the transition is decrepit and bent over. He lights the candles while the Dean speaks of passing on the "light of knowledge." The old frail man is juxtaposed against the youthful junior boys who carry in the banners that each have one word. The four words on the banners are Honor, Discipline, Excellence and Tradition. Although the boys are holding the banners, given their youth and natural rebelliousness at the age of 16 they may have some disagreement with those values.

The new junior Todd Anderson is obviously shy and withdrawn. He bristles when the Dean tells him he has big shoes to fill. His brother was the class valedictorian. From his



reaction, it is a good guess that the author is foreshadowing that Todd will be living under the shadow of his brother and have struggles ahead of him.

Mr. Perry appears to be a devious character. Without his son's knowledge, he has an extracurricular activity taken away from his son, Neil. Neil is very disappointed because it was an activity that he liked and wanted to follow through on. It seems that Neil is destined to have problems not with his school work but with his father's interference.

Given the age of the boys and their natural desire for excitement and the dramatic, Keating is exactly what the doctor ordered. His unorthodox approach to teaching appeals to the rebel in the boys and he quickly becomes their hero.

But what about the school's values: Honor, Discipline, Excellence and Tradition? Keating is bound to be pitted against at least some of those values.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Dean Nolan refuse to allow Todd Anderson to be on the rowing team which is his preference? What does this exchange reveal about Dean Nolan?

Discussion Question 2

Why did Mr. Perry want Neil removed from working on the school annual? What was wrong with the way he went about it?

Discussion Question 3

What does carpe diem mean? How does Keating apply that meaning to his basic philosophy about life and education?

Vocabulary

reverberation, fervent, octogenarian, brogue, demerit, valedictorian, cosine, charismatic

Chapters 5 - 7

Summary

Knox is having dinner at the Danburry house that night. The Danburry's are friends of his parents. He meets Chet Danburry's girlfriend, Chris Noel, and can't get her out of his mind. She's the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen. The other boys tell him to forget her.

Keating tells the boys to rip out a page in their text books entitled, "Understanding Poetry." The boys all laugh while he collects the pages and throws them into the trash. Mr. McAllister pops his head in wondering what all the laughter is about. Keating tells the boys that they are in a battle for their very souls. They will learn more in his class than what the school requires. They will learn that words and ideas have the power to change the world. There is law, banking and business all necessary to sustain life. But poetry is romance, love and beauty – what we live for. He reads from a Whitman poem that ends with, "That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse." Keating looks around and asks what everyone's verse will be.

After class, McAllister comments to Keating that he seems to have quite an interesting class, Fascinating although misguided. McAllister tells him that it's quite a risk telling youngsters that they can be artists when they won't be. They'll hate him for it. Keating responds that he wants them to be free thinkers, not artists. McAllister laughs – he's not a cynic, he's a realist.

Neil brings a copy of the annual the year Keating was a senior. He was a real hell-raiser and a member of the Dead Poets Society. The boys ask Keating about the Dead Poets Society. It was a club that was dedicated to sucking the marrow out of life. The members would meet in a cave and take turns reading poetry aloud. They didn't just read it, they let it drip off their tongues and they created gods! Full membership required a member to be dead. Keating and his friends were just pledges. Their last meeting was 15 years before. The boys want to renew the society. Neil knows where a cave is. Neil invites Todd to go join the others. He doesn't want to come. He wants to be free like Keating talked about, but he doesn't want to read aloud. Neil suggests that he can just listen; the other guys won't care. But Todd doesn't want to be treated differently than everyone else.

When everyone else was asleep, the boys meet and make their way to the cave. Neil reconvenes the Welton Chapter of the dead Poets Society and announces that Todd will not read because he'll be taking notes. Neil reads the opening message from Henry David Thoreau, "I wanted to live deep and suck all the marrow out of life." (57) Knox is inspired by Keating's words and vows to take Chris away from Chet. The boys pass the book around and read selections. When the small fire they made goes out they start to shiver and head back. It was back to reality.



The next day in class, Keating tells the boys to use “exhausted” instead of “tired” – he notices that they must have missed some sleep. He tells them to use “morose” not “sad.” Language was invented to woo women. He reads from Whitman warning the boys that it’s difficult to ignore traditions and parents. Keating leaps on top of his desk and tells the boys he stood on his desk to remind himself to look at things differently, from different perspectives. The boys, except Todd, take turns standing on the desk.

Keating tells the boys when they’re uncertain about something to try to think of it in different ways and to think beyond what they read. Find your own voices, he tells them; take risks and walk on new ground. He gives them assignment to write their own poem to read on Monday. He grins at Todd and tells him that he knows the assignment scares him to death.

Knox is discouraged when he spots Chris kissing Chet at Ridgeway High where they attend school. Neil decides he’s going to try out for a part in “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” at Henley Hall. He’s wanted to try out for a long time but his father would never let him. Neil is concerned that none of what Keating says about getting stirred up about something is registering with Todd. Todd tells him to butt out; he can take care of himself.

Analysis

Keating’s instructions to the junior boys to rip out the page entitled, “Understanding Poetry” is symbolic of his philosophy of life and education. As the premise hinted at a possible showdown, the traditions and standards depicted on the four banners are now being challenged. Ripping the page out of the book and then throwing it in the trash tells the boys to abandon convention and think for themselves. Keating resents that the textbook provided instructions on how to think and specifically how to rate poetry. To Keating that was all wrong, in fact, deleterious. Art can only be appreciated within the soul and spirit of the individual.

The irony cannot be missed in this episode. The very book about the art of poetry is in fact designed to restrain, even snuff out the student’s true appreciation of the arts. Keating’s action was a funny stunt on one level. However, it was a serious and meaningful step that Keating felt he had to take. He was furious that free thinking was being inhibited by the very institution that should be encouraging it. Although it is hyperbole when Keating tells the boys that there is a battle for their very souls, he makes his point.

McAllister’s exchange with Keating about his choice of teaching style represents tradition versus nonconformity. McAllister’s objections are symbolic of the school’s inability to grasp the optimism of Keating’s intentions to open the world to the boys as a good education should do. McAllister warns that the kids will be disappointed when they don’t all become artists. McAllister speaks for a conservative institution that is not able embrace the importance of youngsters being encouraged to live up to their own abilities and not be restricted by tradition and conformity.



When Keating leaps on his desk, he symbolizes the need to look at things at different levels, different perspectives. It is encouraging the boys to be open-minded and not look at issues through a narrow lens.

Discussion Question 1

What is revealed about Keating when he has the boys rip out the “Understanding Poetry” page in their text books? What does he mean when he says that the boys are at war?

Discussion Question 2

What is most appealing to the boys about the prospect of revamping the Dead Poets Society? What risks are they taking and how could this venture reflect back on Keating?

Discussion Question 3

What is the deeper meaning of the exchange between Keating and McAllister? Why could it be construed as a warning to Keating and what could be the ramifications of their discussion?

Vocabulary

tangent, bickering, reverberated, sheepishly, proctor, anthology, abeyance

Chapters 8 - 9

Summary

The boys meet in the cave before soccer practice. Knox laments his unrequited love for Chris Noel. Neil leaves early to try out for the play. Charles declares himself the keeper of the cave; no one can enter without his permission. The boys have found a home away from home at Welton where they can be people they never dreamed of. Everyone is surprised that Keating is the soccer coach.

Knox reads his poem first. It's obviously about Chris. Keating tells him it was a good effort. Keating tells the boys that poetry can be found in music or a photograph or anything that is moving. Poetry must enlighten, thrill and inspire. Keating calls on Todd who hangs his head. Keating tells the class that Todd doesn't think anything inside of him is worthless. To loosen Todd up he makes him give a loud barbaric yawp. He forces Todd to describe Whitman from the portrait hanging in the room with the first thing that comes to mind. Todd says that Whitman mumbles the truth which "is like a blanket that always leaves your feet cold." (80) Todd displays deep emotion as he finishes the poem. Keating and the boys are impressed.

That afternoon Neil brings a small statue that he refers to as the god of the cave. Charlie had brought a sax and plays a few notes. Todd is looser and puts the lampshade that Neil used to cover the statue on his head. Charlie astounds everyone with the beautiful song he plays on the sax. Knox can't take it any longer. He leaves the cave to go call Chris. Back at the dorm, Chris answers when Knox calls but he panics and hangs up. He calls back. She's glad to hear from him and invites him to a party at Chet's house. His parents are going to be out of town.

Neil rushes to the rehearsal across town on his bike. He takes center stage to rehearse with Ginny Danburry, Chet's younger sister. Neil gets a lot of compliments from the director. When he returns he finds Todd leaning against the wall outside obviously upset. It's his birthday. His family sent him the same desk set they sent him last year. They didn't remember. His family is only focused on his brother who gets a big birthday celebration. Todd's father told him he wouldn't be more than the sum total of all the chemicals in his body -- \$5.98 -- unless he worked hard every day of his life to change. His parents never loved him.

Keating has the boys meet him in the courtyard for class. He has Pitts, Cameron, Overstreet and Chapman line up. He tells them to go for a walk. After a while the boys begin skipping and walking in cadence... having fun. McAllister peers out and shakes his head. Dean Nolan is distracted by the noise. He has them stop and critiques their different movements. He reminds them to follow their own paths. The Dean is trying to figure out what to do with Keating.

The boys meet in the cave. Knox isn't there; he's getting ready for the party. Charlie hasn't shown up yet. They hear noises coming from outside. It's Charlie and two older girls, Gloria and Tina. Charlie announces that he's changing his name to "Nuwanda." Knox arrives at the Danburry house. Loud music is blaring from the house. Inside Chris tells him to look for Ginny. She has to find Chet. As the evening goes on, Knox feels increasingly out of place and disappointed that Chris brushed him off. Two boys give him a stiff drink that he is cajoled into drinking. He has too much to drink and stumbles over a couple who are making out on the floor as he goes to leave.

Gloria and Tina are townies. Cameron is afraid they'll get in trouble. Charlie tells him to keep his mouth shut. Sitting around the fire, Tina pulls a flask of whisky out of her coat and offers it around. Neil is angry when Charlie announces that he wrote an article for the school newspaper under the name of the Dead Poets Society demanding that girls be admitted. Charlie promises to take the blame if the faculty gets on to them. Charlie reads excerpts from famous poetry and tells the girl he wrote it himself. Gloria and Tina melt and think Charlie is sweet and wonderful.

Analysis

Keating is sensitive to the struggle that Todd is going through and tries to draw him out. Although he knows that Todd hates to talk in class, he encourages him to give it a try. Todd reveals his emotional depth and artistic side when he comments after reading a Whitman poem that the truth is like a blanket that always leaves your feet cold. Keating is impressed with Todd's emotional reading of the poem. The defensive layers are coming off Todd who has been hiding his true self, afraid to come out and prove he's a failure instead of just silently thinking he is.

Todd relates the blanket metaphor to the dysfunctional relationship with his parents and brother. In the past when he dared be truthful, dared be himself, he was abandoned and left in the cold by something that should warm and comfort him. The blanket represents his parents who are normally the nurturing element in a child's life. But when Todd came out from under his defenses, the disguise he had developed over time, he was exposed and left alone and isolated.

More is revealed about Todd's relationship with his parents. They sent him the same birthday present two years in a row. The gift each year was the same desk set, a cold gift that was impersonal and symbolized their indifference and the coldness that they felt for their younger son. His father had told him that to measure up he would have to work hard every day for the rest of his life. His father had set Todd up for failure and underscored the self-loathing that Todd had already developed due to being abandoned by his parents.

Discussion Question 1

What does Keating mean when he tells the boys that poetry can be found everywhere? Explain how some of the examples he cites are poetic.

Discussion Question 2

Why does Keating have some of the boys walk around the courtyard during class? Why does this action bring attention from McAllister and Dean Nolan and what might be the ramifications for Keating?

Discussion Question 3

When Knox calls Chris why does he hang up when she answers the phone? What expectations did Knox have about the party at the Danburry's house and why does he feel uncomfortable and disappointed?

Vocabulary

philosophically, capriciousness, strife, conjure, cadence, sonorous, knavish, conformity

Chapters 10 - 11

Summary

Knox flops on the couch. He wants to get up and leave by the couple on the floor has pinned him in. He laughs and takes another drink. He hears a voice say how beautiful "Chris" is. It must be Chet! His eyes are riveted on Chris. Knox is unable to control himself. He reaches out and strokes Chris on the neck then down to her breast. It's dark and Chris thinks it's Chet. After it goes on for a while, Chet turns a light on and catches Knox and punches him in the face and continues to pummel him. Chris tries to get him to stop but he's in a frenzy. Charlie gets the other guys to leave so he's alone with Gloria. All she wants is to hear more poetry.

The next day all the boys are called to the chapel. Knox's face is battered and bruised. Dean Nolan addressed the group about the unauthorized letter that appeared in the Welton Honors about the need for girls at Welton. He vows to find the guilty parties. If the guilty confesses they can avoid expulsion. Suddenly there was the sound of a telephone coming from Charlie's briefcase. He answers the phone then hands it to Dean Nolan. He says it's God who says there should be girls at Welton. Dean Nolan paddles Charlie's behind after Charlie confesses that he slipped the article in the newspaper.

The Dean wants to know what the Dead Poets Society is. Charlie swears that there's no society. It's only him. Later Nolan has a word with Keating. He warns Keating that the boys are very impressionable. He's heard rumors about Keating's unorthodox teaching methods. He reminds him that the curriculum is set at Welton. Keating stops by the dorm and tells Charlie that he pulled a stupid stunt. Getting expelled isn't a positive. He tells the boys to keep their heads about them. At class the next day, he talks to the boys about college and how it will kill their love for poetry. He tells them how to convince their professors that they read a book that they didn't read. He gives them some tips on passing college exams. As they take a mock test, Keating begins showing slides of scantily dressed women. All Knox can think about is Chris.

Todd helps Neil with his lines in the play. Neil tells Todd that he could help with stage lighting. There are lots of girls there. Todd promises to come to the performance. Neil loves acting and being in the play. When they return to the dorm, Neil's father is sitting at his desk. He tells Neil he has to quit the play. He warns Neil not to talk back to him. He found out from the parent of one of the kids in the play. Neil has one of the leads and the opening is the next night. Mr. Perry is adamant. Neil has to quit.

Dr. Hager observes the boys who seem to be having trouble eating. Several of the right-handed boys are eating with their left hands. Knox explains that they are breaking old habits because they "perpetuate mechanical living." (112) Dr. Hager tells them to concentrate on their studies rather than breaking old habits. The boys urge Neil to talk

to Keating about his father. Keating's not in his room. The door is unlocked and they enter.

Keating's room is sparsely furnished. There is a photo of a beautiful woman on his desk and a half-written letter sitting next to it. It starts out, "My darling Jessica, It's so lonely at times without you..." (114) Keating walks in, takes the letter and puts it in his pocket. The other boys leave so Neil can talk privately with Keating. Neil tells him about his father making him quit the play. Keating tells Neil he has to talk to his father and tell him who he really is – that he loves acting.

The other boys gather in the cave. Todd is writing a poem while Charlie plays a few notes on the sax. Knox is mumbling to himself still lamenting over Chris. He's determined to get his poem to her; he thinks that will win her over. Cameron is worried; it's ten minutes to curfew. No one moves so Cameron leaves by himself. Soon the other boys follow.

The next morning Knox takes off on his bike in the thick snow toward Ridgeway High. Inside the school, he finds Chris at her locker. She warns him to stay away. Chet wants to kill him. He doesn't care – he loves her! He hands her some flowers but she won't take them. She tells him he's crazy and rushes off. He follows her and barges into her classroom. He just wants her to listen. He unfolds a paper and begins reading his poem to her. Chris turns bright red; the other kids are stifling their giggles. After the conclusion of his poem, he tells Chris he loves her and walks out.

Analysis

Knox is a romantic. Inspired by the poetry and the Dead Poets Society, Knox has written a love sonnet for Chris. He is obsessed with her and feels uncomfortable at the party. But he feels uncomfortable everywhere because he is suffering from unrequited love like the poets write about. Knox who reluctantly took some stiff drinks from some guy, gets himself in trouble. Between the booze and his obsession, he makes some regrettable moves on Chris. Chet catches on and beats him up.

The letter that Charlie slipped into the school newsletter from the "The Dead Poets Society" asking that girls be allowed to enroll at Welton has enraged Dean Nolan. The Dean is onto Mr. Keating's unorthodox teaching methodology and is looking for something to use against him. He is aware that Keating has been encouraging his boys to express themselves which is now evidenced in this letter.

The letter symbolizes a dropping of the gauntlet in the war between liberalism and conservatism. Merely suggesting that girls be allowed to enroll is something that could be handled with little ado. But Nolan wants to use it as evidence that Keating is actually a bad influence on the boys and on the school as an institution. He will keep it in his quiver in the case he is building against him. When the boys were marching in the courtyard he asked himself what he could do about Keating. Now he has some direction.



As much as Keating expresses himself in art and poetry, he is a private person. The framed picture of the beautiful girl and half-written letter in Keating's room tells part of a story. He writes that he misses her but doesn't finish the letter. The letter symbolizes a broken relationship that Keating is trying to repair or one that he has given upon.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Knox behave the way he does at the party? What Chet wrong for his reaction? Did Knox owe Chris and Chet an apology?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Keating side with Dean Nolan after Charlie's strange outburst? How will Nolan use the formation of the Dead Poets Society against Keating?

Discussion Question 3

What drives Knox to burst into Chris's classroom and read the poem to her? What is he risking by his actions?

Vocabulary

profane, ferreting, expulsion, conformist, unorthodox, transcendence, frivolous

Chapters 12 - 15

Summary

Knox races back to Welton as fast as he could go. The other boys are just finishing up in Keating's class. Keating asks to speak to Neil privately. Neil lied to Keating telling him that he talked to his father and that his father is allowing him to stay in acting as long as he keeps his grades up. That evening Keating and the boys meeting in the dorm lobby to go to Henley Hall to see Neil's play. Charlie opens his shirt; he has painted a red lightning bolt on his chest. It's a virility symbol and makes him feel potent.

Just as they start to leave the lobby, Chris walks in. Knox is stunned. She wants him to stop harassing her and warns him that Chet is furious and will be hunting him down. He insists that he loves her. She points out the he doesn't even know her. It was love at first sight. Chris is going to the play but without Chet so Chris invites her to go with him. If she can't stand him after the night, he'll leave her alone forever.

Knox and Chris sit in the back row. Neil is brilliant on stage and doesn't miss a line. The curtain fell on Neil's closing monologue. The audience burst into applause and gave the actors a standing ovation. The boys gather and congratulate Neil on his perfect performance. The director whispers to Neil that his father is there. Neil spots his father standing in the back of the theater. Mr. Perry grabs Neil and hauls him out like he's arresting him. Keating intercedes and tells Neil he was brilliant. Mr. Perry tells Keating to stay away from Neil. Mr. Perry pushes Neil into his car and races off.

Mr. Perry tells Neil he's withdrawing him from Welton and enrolling him into Braden Military. He is going to Harvard and he is going to be a doctor. He takes him home where his mother sits, silent but appearing like she wants to say something. Todd, Meeks, Pitts, Charlie and Ginny head to the cave. Todd is ready to punch Mr. Peters in the face. To their utter surprise, Keating pops his head in. He tells the boys not to be glum; Neil wouldn't like that. Charlie suggests they have a meeting in Neil's honor and Keating should lead it. Keating is a little reticent but without much prompting opens the meeting with the "live deep and suck out all the marrow of life," line. He then reads a poem by e.e. cummings that begins, "dive for dreams or a slogan may topple you." (150) Chris is still with Knox. They drift away from the group and kiss.

Todd offers to read the poem he's been working on. Keating and the boys are impressed. Everyone applauds. Keating sees great things for him in the future. Meanwhile, Neil was back at home feeling drained and empty.

Keating leads the kids back to school in the cold dark night, repeating, "Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb" as they walk. Mr. and Mrs. Perry were asleep when Neil slipped downstairs. He went to his father's desk and opened the bottom drawer, picked up the flower crown he wore as Puck and put it on his head. Mr. and Mrs. Perry wake to

a loud noise. Mr. Perry finds Neil lying in a pool of his own blood in his office, a handgun grasped in his hand.

The next morning, Charlie, Knox and Meeks wake Todd from a deep sleep. Neil is dead. He shot himself. Todd is hysterical. Todd screams that Neil's father killed him without pulling the trigger. Keating is in his classroom alone. He plops down in Neil's chair and sobs. Neil is laid to rest in the town of Welton. The Dead Poets are his pallbearers. His parents, Nolan and Keating are all grief stricken. The school is going to investigate the circumstances leading to his suicide. Cameron says the school's not after them, they're after Keating. He says to let Keating fry. Why ruin their lives?! Charlie punches Cameron in the jaw and knocks him over.

The boys are brought to the Dean's office one by one. Todd admits being a member of the Dead Poets Society. He hands Todd a document that describes Keating's reckless behavior in class and how he encouraged the boys to break the rules and revamp the club. And that it all led to Neil's death. Their goal is to see that Keating never teaches again. Todd's parents are in the office. His father orders him to sign the paper. But Keating's whole life is teaching and cares more about him than they do. Todd won't sign the paper because it's not true. Nolan warns him that he'll be on disciplinary probation the rest of the school year.

Mr. Keating packs up his beloved poetry books and prepares to leave. He comes to his old classroom to collect some personal items. Keating sees that the boys are emotional, torn apart. Just as Keating is about to exit, Todd speaks up and says that the boys were made to sign the paper. He tells Nolan that it wasn't Keating's fault. The boys one by one climb up on the tops of their desks. Keating tells the boys thanks and leaves.

Analysis

The dramatic climax of the story is the tragic suicide of Neil's suicide. It symbolizes the ultimate battle between tradition and progressiveness. Neil and Keating represent art and nonconformity while Mr. Perry and the school represent compliance and the status quo. There are battle scars in this war for the hearts and minds of the students. Charlie is suspended for speaking up. Mr. Keating is blamed for Neil's death and is fired. The kids are made to sign a document essentially blaming Keating for misleading and misinforming the students and, worse, for Neil's death.

So does the story end with art and poetry losing? Knox's love sonnet worked and he is winning Chris over. And Todd finds himself and the "self" he finds is strong, principled and honest. He won't sign the letter because it's not true. He tells his parents and Dean Nolan who are pressuring him to sign the letter that Mr. Keating cared for him more than his parents did. Mr. Keating cared!

When Mr. Keating comes to his old classroom to pick up his belongings, the kids show their solidarity with him. He told them that when they encountered problems to not look at them through a narrow lens. He told them to look at them from different perspectives.



As Mr. Keating turns to leave the Todd tells him that the kids were pressured to sign the letter. Todd tells the Dean that Neil's death wasn't his fault. Led by Todd, one by one the boys stand atop their desks just as Mr. Keating did on that first day of school as a symbol of their solidarity with him.

Discussion Question 1

Why did Neil lie to Keating about talking to his father about his love of acting? Had Neil talked to Mr. Perry about his desire to act, would things have changed for Neil?

Discussion Question 2

Why did Neil feel driven to take his own life? Were there signs of warning leading up to the tragedy?

Discussion Question 3

Why did Dean Nolan try to blame Mr. Keating for Neil's suicide? Did Nolan sincerely believe Keating was to blame or did he have an ulterior motive? What was his ulterior motive?

Vocabulary

enraptured, spherical, infuriating, homage, lament, blatant, impressionable

Characters

John Keating

John Keating is the new English teacher at Welton Academy. He is a young man in his early 30s at the most. The junior boys are exhausted by the time they get to Keating's class on their first day of the new school year. They have been laden down with homework from math, Latin and history. They are quite surprised by Mr. Keating. Not only does he give them no homework, he basically just talks to the boys – about his love of poetry and the importance of youngsters like these boys becoming free thinkers. He wants the boys to be their own person and push aside tradition and conformity.

To make his point, Keating often leaps atop his desk. He does so, he tells the boys, as a reminder to always look at any issue from different perspectives. He reads a line from a poem containing the Latin phrase “carpe diem” and discusses its importance. The Latin meaning for “carpe diem” is seize the day. He emphasizes that there is urgency in seizing the day, making the most of any day, because the “worms” are awaiting everyone. Each person has just a limited amount of time on earth and must make the most of it. The boys are mesmerized by Mr. Keating and he quickly becomes their favorite instructor and their friend.

One of the boys finds an old annual when Keating was a senior at Welton. He was “captain of the soccer team, editor of the annual, Cambridge-bound, man most likely to do anything, thigh man, Dead Poets Society.” And Dean Nolan tells them that Keating was a Rhodes scholar. The boys are impressed but are most curious about the Dead Poets Society. He tells them that when he was at Welton, he and a small group of friends formed the secret society that was dedicated to the works of dead poets. In fact, only dead men could be members of the society. Everyone else was just a pledge.

The boys revamp the Dead Poets Society but when Dean Nolan gets wind up it, he announces that those boys who are members of the secret club will be expelled. Mr. Keating's avant garde approach to teaching eventually leads to his removal from the school. He was an easy target to become the scapegoat in the tragic suicide of one of the boys. Keating was blamed for the boy's death because he was leading him down the wrong path although the fault lay at the feet of the boy's domineering father.

Neil Perry

Neil Perry is a returning junior. He is an excellent student and an affable, kind-hearted boy. The new boy Todd Anderson is his roommate. Todd is a little standoffish and reserved and is razzed by the other boys. But Neil senses that Todd is hurting and he does everything he can to support him. He shows his kind and generous nature by always urging Todd to do things with him and the other boys and encourages him about his talents and abilities. Neil is protective of Todd because he knows he's hurting.



Neil Perry's father is a harsh, domineering man who has Neil's future all worked out. Only problem – he never bothered to ask Neil what he wanted to do with his life. Mr. Perry tells Neil that he will go to Harvard and he will be a doctor. Neil enjoys being the assistant editor on the school newspaper but Mr. Perry has him removed from that role because he doesn't want any extra-curricular activity to compromise his studies.

Neil's real love is the arts. Without telling his father, he tries out for "A Midsummer Night's Dream" which is being held at Henley Hall, a nearby school. He earns the part of Puck and puts on a brilliant performance on opening night. His father gets wind up Neil's acting venture and shows up at the auditorium. After the play he literally drags Neil to his car, pulls him out of school and returns home with him.

That first night home, Neil sneaks down to his father's desk, takes out his handgun and kills himself.

Todd Anderson

Todd Anderson is the new boy in the junior class. He is reserved and standoffish. After the welcoming ceremony, Dean Nolan tells Todd that he has big shoes to fill. His brother John attended Welton and was the valedictorian and a National Merit Scholar. It's not exactly what Todd needed to hear. He already knew that he did not measure up to his brother and suffers under the giant shadow cast by his older brother. Todd's parents have always favored Jeffrey and treated Todd like an afterthought. His father told him he would have to work every day for the rest of his life if he wanted to turn things around. On his birthday he is hurt because his parents sent him the identical desk set that they had given him the year before. They didn't remember. The boys support Todd, especially Neil who encourages him and tries to convince him that he is bright and capable. Todd hates to read aloud because of his lack of confidence and low self-esteem - something that Mr. Keating helps him overcome.

Knox Overstreet

Knox Overstreet is one of the junior boys in Mr. Keating's class. He is a romantic and falls head over heels for Chris Noel when he meets her at the home of one of his father's old friends. Chris is the most beautiful girl he's ever seen and is determined to win her over. He works up the nerve to call her one evening. She tells him about a party at the Danburry's house. Chet's parents are going to be out of town and he's going to have a big party. Knox goes to the party and is heartsick while Chris spends all her time with Chet and when it gets dark, they make out. After a few stiff drinks, Knox is able to get a few feels in on Chris. When Chet discovers what Knox is doing, he beats Knox up. But Knox is undeterred. He writes a love poem for Chris, bursts in on her class and reads it to her before all the students. He tells her he loves her. She is embarrassed at first, but he begins to win her over.



Steven Meeks

Steven Meeks is the intellect of the group. He knows Latin and Greek and is great at math, even trig. Meeks is humble and magnanimous in his willingness to tutor the other guys. Mr. Keating, the new English teacher, is duly impressed by Meeks who knows the Greek translation for hoi polloi is “herd,” something that Keating urges them not to be a part of. When the boys decide to revamp the Dead Poets Society, they tease Meeks that he can’t join if his grades are suffering – which is not even a remote possibility. Meeks says he’ll try anything once – except sex one of the boys offer which makes Meeks blush. He’s obviously an outstanding student but a little behind in social development and experimentation.

Richard Cameron

Richard Cameron is a Welton Society candidate which gave him the honor of carrying one of the Welton banners during the opening day ceremony. Cameron conforms with school traditions and is a little bit of an elitist. He at first resists joining the Dead Poets Society because it sounds boring – but boring isn’t the real problem he has with the club. He fears he might get in trouble which would upset his straight-laced parents and ruin his reputation. In the end, Cameron is the first to betray Mr. Keating.

Charlie Dalton

Charlie Dalton is a bright and creative young man. He is filled with mischief and is very impressionable and vulnerable to the avant garde teaching of John Keating. Charlie has a little problem with identity. He sees the talents and abilities in the other boys but doesn’t know where he’s heading. After the Dead Poets Society is revamped Charlie has the brilliant idea of dubbing the cave they meet in as the Charles Dalton Cave for Passionate Experimentation. No one can enter the cave without his permission. Charlie plays the sax and astonishes the boys with how well he plays. He is girl crazy and is constantly thinking of ways to get a girl’s attention. He paints a red lightning bolt on his chest which he tells the other boys is a sign of virility.

Gerard Pitts

Gerard Pitts is one of the junior boys in Mr. Keating’s class. Pitts is put through the paces in P.E. and thinks he’s going to die. Pitts thinks the gym master should be in the military. Pitts is philosophical about girls – all the good ones go for jerks. He advises Knox to forget about Chris Noel because she’s taken. Pitts is always snacking on something. This habit comes in handy when the boys confront a snarling dog on the way to the cave for a meeting of their secret club. He has cookies in his pockets and feeds them to the dog to distract him so they can walk on.

Dean Nolan

Dean Gale Nolan is a strict administrator and adheres to school policy down to the last detail. He is enthused when he first hires John Keating to take over the English class. However, he begins to realize that Keating's unorthodox teaching style is not a good fit for Welton. When Dean Nolan gets wind of the Dead Poets Society, he vows to suspend any student who is associated with it. After the suicide of Neil Perry, Nolan in collusion with Neil's father points the finger of blame at Keating. Their reasoning is that Keating influenced the impressionable young man into thinking he could have a career that would be impossible for him.

Mr. Perry

Mr. Perry is Neil's domineering father. He claims he wants the best for his son, and that's why he enrolled in the exclusive Welton Academy. Mr. Perry has Neil's life all planned out for him. He is going to Harvard and will become a doctor. He didn't bother to ask Neil what he wants to do. If he had asked him, he would have found out that Neil loves the arts and especially acting. When Mr. Perry discovers that Neil is acting in a play without telling his parents, he hits the ceiling. He pulls Neil out of Welton and reemphasizes what Neil's future is going to be... with very tragic results.

Chris Noel

Knox is invited to have dinner one night at the Danburry's estate. The Danburry family is wealthy and the parents are friends of Knox's father. It is there that he meets Chris Noel. She is a year older and the most beautiful girl Knox has ever seen. It is love at first sight and he can't get her out of his mind. The problem is that she is Chet Danburry's girlfriend. Chet and Chris are students at Ridgeway High. He plays football and Chris is a cheerleader. Although the other boys tell Knox to forget Chris, he knows that she's the girl for him. He writes a poem for her and bursts into her class and reads it to her. He ends by saying he loves her. She is humiliated and Chet, who had already beaten Knox up at a party for touching Chris, is ready to kill. Chris goes to the school play with Knox and he finally begins to win her over.

Chet Danburry

Chet Danburry is a member of the wealthiest family in the area. Chet is a football player for Ridgeway High. Knox's father is close friends with the family which is where Knox meets Chet and his girlfriend, Chris Noel, when Knox comes for dinner one evening. Knox flips for Chris. He swears it's love at first sight. When Knox gets too touchy-feely with Chris at a party, Chet beats Knox to a pulp.



Ginny Danburry

Ginny Danburry is Chet's sister. She goes to Henley Hall which is the same school that Knox's sister attends. Ginny is Knox's age but he thinks of her as plain and unappealing, especially after seeing the beautiful Chris Noel. Ginny has a part in "Midsummer Night's Dream" the same play that Neil Perry is in. She and Charlie hit it off. She goes with the boys to the cave after opening night of the play.

George McAllister

George McAllister is a fellow teacher of Keating's at Welton Academy. He has noticed Keating's avant garde approach to teaching and he warns him not to over-promise the kids and raise their expectations beyond reason. Not everyone can be Rembrandt or Mozart. Keating replies that he's not telling the kids to be artists, he's telling them to think for themselves, think freely which he feels is the most important part of an education.

Symbols and Symbolism

Dead Poets Society

The Dead Poets Society was a secret club that was formed by John Keating and his friends when Keating attended Welton Academy. The only members of the club were dead poets. However, Keating and his friends were pledges. They met in a cave and read their favorite poetry alive. But there was more to the club. They began each meeting with the line, quoting Thoreau, “live deep and suck out all the marrow of life.” They believed in carpe diem personified. They not only read poetry, it rolled off their tongues like honey. They created gods!

When the junior boys find out that Keating had been a member of the secret society, they want to know all about it. They are inspired to revamp the club and begin having meetings in the same cave where Keating met with his friends. They begin each session with the same line, “live deep and suck out all the marrow of life.” They read poetry and talk about dreams and ideas and some strong relationships are created.

When Charlie writes an anonymous letter in the student paper that girls should be allowed to attend Welton and signs it, “The Dead Poets Society,” the administration is on to them and vows to suspend any student who belongs to this authorized secret club.

Photos of Former Students

Mr. Keating has the boys view the photos of past classes in the Honor Room. He tells them to notice that their faces are just as bright and hopeful for the future as their own. However, he asks, how many of these boys became the adults they had dreamed of being? Most are fertilizing daffodils! He emphasizes that the boys can't let go of their dreams and must work hard to attain them. Time passes fast and the opportunities to have the future they want can quickly elude them.

“Understanding Poetry”

In the Pritchard text book of poetry, there is an introductory section entitled, “Understanding Poetry.” In the section it describes a chart that can be used as a rating system for poetry. Mr. Keating has one of the boys read the section. As the boy is reading, Keating draws the chart that is referred to in the narrative on the blackboard. Then he suddenly howls like an animal and tells them that it's all garbage! He instructs the boys to tear the page out of their text books. As they tear the pages out, Keating collects them and throws them in the trash. Keating tells them that they are in a battle for their souls. They will either succumb to tradition or will triumph as individuals.



Jessica's Photograph

One day the boys want to meet with Keating. They knock on his apartment door but there is no answer. They try the door and it swings open. They go inside to wait there for him. Charlie looks around on his desk and finds the photograph of a beautiful girl. He sees that there is a half-written letter to Jessica. The letter begins with Keating tell her how much he misses her. Keating comes in and snatches the letter away from Charlie. All he says is that a woman is like a cathedral to be worshiped. The photo and letter add to Keating's mystique because the boys know nothing about him. As open as he seems to be there is a deeply private part to which he does not allow many people access.

Midsummer Night's Dream

Neil decided to try out for Shakespearean play, "A Midsummer Night's Dream," which was being held at Henley Hall, a school located near Welton. Neil tried out for the part of "Puck" and won the role. He didn't tell his father who he knew would hit the roof if he knew Neil was in a play. On opening night, Neil gave a flawless and brilliant performance. His father had gotten word that Neil was acting in a play. He showed up at the school auditorium and after the performance dragged Neil away, took him out of Welton and brought him back home.

The School Banners

The opening day ceremony for Welton Academy for Boys featured the bearing of the school banners which displayed the four pillars of the institution: Honor, Discipline, Excellence and Tradition. These were the fundamental values of the school and close attention was paid to make sure that no one violated them. Mr. Keating would prove that a teacher could reach his students with out "discipline" and "tradition."

The Signed Document

After Neil's suicide, the school in collusion with Mr. Perry tried to put the blame on Mr. Keating. They reasoned that his unorthodox teaching practices led Neil to believe he could be an actor. Neil's future was all neatly arranged for him via his father and Keating was interfering with those plans. Keating put stars in Neil's eyes and when Neil was forced to return to reality, the disappointment caused by Keating's over-the-top expectations of the boys caused Neil to become severely depressed. Charlie spoke up right away in disagreement and got suspended. The other boys all signed the letter agreeing that Keating led to Neil's suicide - except Todd Anderson. He wouldn't sign it because it wasn't true.

Carpe Diem

John Keating was determined to teach his boys to think for themselves and to be free and independent spirits. To Keating, learning to be one's own person was an important part of any education. He quoted a line that contained the Latin phrase, "carpe diem," which translated means seize the day. And that is exactly what Keating wanted to get across to the boys – make every minute count, the worms await us all.

The Desk Sets

Todd Anderson's sense that his parents didn't care for him as much as they did his older brother was confirmed when he received the same desk set for his birthday that they had sent him for his birthday the year before. It showed how little thought went into Todd's gift and birthday. Birthday celebrations for his older brother, Jeffrey who was the golden child, had always been elaborate.

Mechanical Living

After the problems arose with the Dead Poets Society and Neil's problem with his father, the boys decided to show their dissatisfaction by staging a protest. There was no violence or outbursts. It was a quiet movement aimed at breaking old habits that perpetuate mechanical living. It had been the main emphasis of Mr. Keating for the boys to learn to think freely and be independent. As a symbol of that mindset, the boys who were all right-handed began eating their meals with their left hands.

Settings

Welton Academy

Welton Academy is the private school where the story takes place. It is located in a remote area in the Vermont hills. There are 300 boys enrolled in the school. It is an old traditional private school, established 100 years before. Dean Nolan is the administrator of the school and a strict adherent to school policy. The opening day ceremony takes place in the campus chapel. Mr. Keating, the young new English teacher, attended the school a few years before. There is a Junior Honors room where the boys meet sometimes and where photographs of former classes line the walls.

The Cave

The junior boys discover that Mr. Keating had organized a secret club called the Dead Poets Society when he was a student at Welton. The boys are excited about the prospect of a secret club and decide to revamp it. Mr. Keating told them that he held their meetings in a cave just beyond the woods surrounding school. The boys find the cave and begin having their meetings there. They have to trek through the woods in the dark and cold to get to the cave. It's freezing in the cave so they make small fires to keep warm while they read their poetry selections.

Ridgeway High School

Knox Overstreet is madly in love with Chris Noel who goes to Ridgeway High School which is in the same area as Welton. Knox rides his bike over to Ridgeway, barges in on Chris's class and reads a love poem to her that he had written. Although she is at first humiliated by his actions, she begins to soften toward him. As the story ends, Knox and Chris are seen together holding hands and kissing.

Henley Hall

Neil tries out for "A Midsummer Night's Dream" at Henley Hall. He wins the part of Puck. Henley Hall is where Ginny Danburry goes to school. She attends Henley Hall and is also in the play. All the junior boys go to Neil's opening night. He gives a brilliant performance. As he's being congratulated, the director tells him that his father is waiting for him at the back of the auditorium. Neil's father drags him outside and into his car, irate that Neil was in a play without his permission.

The Dormitory

Welton is a private boarding school and all the boys stay in the dormitory during the school year. Neil and Todd are roommates in the dorm and become close friends during their stay together. The other junior boys in Mr. Keating's class all stay in dorm rooms nearby. Mr. Keating lives at Welton and has an apartment in one of the dorm buildings.

Themes and Motifs

Poetry

An obvious theme in “Dead Poets Society,” is poetry. Although poetry takes only a featured role in this story, it is at the heart of much of what Keating believes about life, philosophy and most importantly education. Keating tells the kids to rip out a page in their text book entitled, “Understanding Poetry.” He abhors the ranking system that the section contains. He resents that a text book would tell students how to rank a poem when compared to another or what poem to like or dislike. He understands that poetry is art and its beauty is in the soul and heart of the reader or listener.

Keating's dramatic action in removing a piece of the curriculum of the stuffy private school was a daring move which later comes back to haunt him. But Keating doesn't care. If he can get through to a few kids and free their hearts and spirits through poetry or other art, then he feels he has succeeded. He had been a student at Welton so he knows its ultra-conservative bent. Trying to change the school's view of poetry and art would be a kamikaze mission. He'll be satisfied with a few victories.

Keating focuses on a stanza from “The the Virgins, To Make Much of Time,” that begins, “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, old time is still a flying: and this same flower that smiles today, tomorrow will be dying.” He explains that the Latin term for that message is “Carpe Diem” which means to seize life, to make the most of every minute – to not waste it on being someone you're not or doing something you hate. The poet wrote the lines because, as Keating puts it, everyone is food for worms. Everyone has only a limited number of springs, summers and falls. The worms await! When Neil commits suicide the boys mourn him at a meeting of the Dead Poets Society. The repeat over and over, “Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?” which is the title of a hymn.

Todd who is the shyest of the boys and suffers from self-esteem issues writes a poem near the end of the semester. A line in his poem echoes Keating's spirit: “We are running from the battle when it's one that must be fought... dreaming of the wisdom that we are dodging daily.” With that poem, Keating had all the success he ever dreamed of.

Independent Thinking

Although John Keating, the new English teacher at Welton Academy for boys, obviously loves literature and especially poetry, his real mission in his new role at the boys' school is to teach the boys to be independent, think freely and question conformity. He reminds them that the worms await everyone and that time is so dear and limited that a moment should not be wasted doing something other than what one's dreams dictate.

In one particular incident, Keating tells Neil to open the text book and read the paragraph entitled, “Understanding Poetry.” Part of the material covers a rating graph which Keating draws on the board demonstrating how a Shakespeare poem



overwhelms a Byron poem. He first tells the boys to use the graph as a rating system for the poems they study. But he doesn't mean it. He then feigns choking and tells them to rip that page out of their books. The boys laugh as they all rip the page out and he collects them and throws them in the trash. The symbolic trashing of guidelines about how to view poetry is the author's way through the character of John Keating to tell the youth of the world to think for themselves and to develop their own unique way of viewing art.

Dean Nolan becomes concerned with Keating's unorthodox approach to teaching. Keating tells him that he is teaching the boys about the evils of conformity and that a real education is learning to think for oneself. Keating leaps atop his desk during class one day. By this symbolic act Keating illustrates the importance of looking at an issue from different perspectives. He tells the boy that in the future when they face a problem to force themselves to look at it in more than one way.

Keating was a graduate of Welton and returned as a teacher. He knew the conservative nature of the school administration and curriculum. He had experienced what it was to be a student there and probably felt the need to return and cultivate a few free thinkers and liberate a few spirits.

Emotional Abandonment

Emotional abandonment is just as devastating as physical abandonment. Although Todd Anderson's parents sent him to an expensive private school, they did not demonstrate any love for him. His older brother was their pride and joy. Jeffrey had gone to Welton a few years before. He was the valedictorian and a National Merit Scholar. Todd is a reserved young man and is reticent about speaking up or reading aloud in class. He lives under the shadow of his older brother. He has low self-esteem because he feels unloved and unappreciated by his parents.

Neil is Todd's roommate and senses that Todd is depressed about something. At first Todd won't talk about it. He tells Neil to butt out. But Todd loosens up, realizing that Neil really cares about him. Todd is upset on his birthday. He shows Neil that he received a desk set from his parents. It's the identical set that they gave him the year before. They gave so little thought to his gift that they got him the same gift two years in a row. It confirmed to Todd what he already knew. His parents did not care about him or how he felt.

Todd's father told him that he'd have to work hard every day for the rest of his life to turn things around. Why his father treated Todd so harshly is not clear. When Todd is confronted by Dean Nolan and required to sign a document stating that Mr. Keating was at fault for causing Neil's emotional problems, he refuses to sign because it wasn't true. His parents are present and encourage him to sign. His mother says, please sign for "our sake." Mr. Anderson is more direct and screams at him to sign. Todd is finally able to speak up and refuses to lie for the Dean or for his parents. He tells his parents that Mr. Keating cares for him more than they do. Todd Anderson's parents cared for him



physically. However, they abandoned him emotionally, and as his parents, such abandonment leaves as deep a scar as does physical abandonment.

Neil Perry had also been abandoned emotionally by his parents, particularly by his domineering father. Mr. Perry perhaps was living through his son and had planned out his future without asking Neil what he wanted to do. A loving parent will guide a child but not dictate his every move. Mr. Perry ceased being Neil's father and became his jailer when he refused to let Neil be the person he was meant to be and find the kind of future he wanted for himself.

Desks

"Desks" are included in many narratives in "Dead Poets Society." It is not surprising that desks would play a role in a story about a boys private school. However, there are deeper meanings to the desks as presented in this story.

Mr. Keating dramatically leaps on top of his desk. He tells the students that he stands on his desk to remind himself to have different perspectives on issues. He urges the boys that when they are faced with a problem to be open and look at it in various ways. He has the boys take turns leaping on top of his desk to have a sense of the freedom that it can provide. It is an unorthodox action for an English teacher in a conservative boys academy to take which signals to the boys that being different is good. The desk is a symbol of authority and discipline and Keating is trampling all over it.

Todd Anderson who is living under the shadow of his overachieving brother who attended the school earlier, is glum and hopeless about his chances for a bright future. He unpacks a desk set that his parents gave him the year before. A few months later, Todd is upset when on his birthday his parents send him the identical desk set. They put so little thought into his gift that they didn't realize they were giving him the same gift. They'd never do that to his brother, Jeffrey.

When the boys let themselves in Mr. Keating's apartment, they find a sparsely furnished room which is highlighted by a desk. Charlie is drawn to the desk because sitting on it the framed photograph of a beautiful girl. Lying on the desk next to the photo is a half-written letter to "Jessica." Keating writes that he misses her. Keating catches Charlie and snatches the letter away. Although Keating appears to be an open and accessible, there is a mystique about him. No one knows much about his personal life and he apparently wants to keep it that way.

When Neil's father forces him to quit the play he's in and removes him from Welton Academy, Neil sneaks downstairs in the middle of the night to his father's study. He unlocks the bottom drawer of his father's desk, takes out a handgun and kills himself.

The school administration blames Neil's death on Keating whose avant garde teaching methods were leading him down the wrong path. When Keating, who was terminated, comes into his old English class to collect some personal things, the boys one-by-one

stand on their desks as a symbol of solidarity with Keating while Todd yells that Neil's death wasn't Keating's fault.

Unrequited Love

So much of English literature, especially poetry, is devoted to one subject: love. A good portion of poems about love and romance are about unrequited love – love that is one sided, that is impossible. The author, N. H. Kleinbaum, novelized the book from the motion picture which was written by screenwriter, Tom Schulman. The story is purported to be semi-autobiographical. As such, it is obvious that Schulman is a fan of poetry and he would be remiss if he didn't devote part of his story to love, its pain and joy.

To represent the genre of the romantic poem and especially unrequited love, the author created the character Knox Overstreet who is a romantic and, at 16, very interested in the opposite sex. He is stopped in his tracks by a beautiful older girl – one year older at the most – who is a vision and the perfect girl for him. He falls head over heels at first sight.

Conveniently, the boys are to write their own poetry about anything going on in their lives. Naturally, the only thing that Knox has on his mind is the girl of his dreams, Chris Noel. It doesn't matter that she has a possessive boyfriend who is a big football star at their high school, that the boyfriend is from the wealthiest family in the area and that Knox's father is close friends with the family. Even being beaten rather roundly by the boyfriend doesn't deter him. Like a true romantic with the heart of a poet, nothing matters other than Knox's obsession for Chris and his quest to make her his.

To demonstrate the power of poetry, the character Knox writes a love poem to Chris and bicycles to her school determined to win her over. He finds her at her locker and presents her with flowers but that doesn't do it. She tells him to leave her alone. But Knox doesn't go away. He, in fact, follows her to her classroom and in front of her fellow students Knox bursts in and reads the love poem he dedicated to her. He ends the poem with, "I love you." Although at first humiliated by Knox's behavior, Chris begins to soften and opens up to him. The poem did its job.

There is a mystique surrounding Keating's personal life. He has a half-written letter to a woman named Jessica whose photo is framed on his desk. Perhaps Keating himself has experienced a lost or unrequited love.

Styles

Point of View

“Dead Poets Society” by N. H. Kleinbaum is a work of fiction and is written in the third person from the perspective of the main characters, the boys of the junior English class. There is the use of some limited omniscience in the telling of the which allows the reader to learn the private thoughts, intentions and motivations of key characters. It is “limited” because the minor players are not included in these in-depth revelations.

One main character in “Dead Poets Society” whose inner thoughts and emotions are not included in this omniscience is John Keating who is the new English teacher at Welton Academy. By not giving the reader access to Keating’s thoughts and intentions, the character maintains a mystique which mimics an element in the story. The boys are curious about Keating and intrigued by his unusual approach to teaching and his life philosophy; the readers are just as curious. Keating keeps a distance between his professional and personal life; the boys know nothing about it. By keeping the Keating character somewhat in the dark, the author compels the readers to see Keating through the eyes of the boys.

The reader learns the inner confusion and turmoil of the boys. Todd is struggling because he feels unloved by his parents and overshadowed by his overachieving older brother. Knox is enraptured by a young girl who is already taken. Neil is struggling with an overbearing father who has a future mapped out for him that he does not want to follow.

Language and Meaning

“Dead Poets Society” by N. H. Kleinbaum takes place at an private boys’ academy. The school is traditional and conservative and does not condone even a sign of non-conformity. The conventional nature of the school is made obvious by the opening ceremony for the new school year. Firstly, it takes place in a chapel which underscores the conservative character of the school. Four junior boys walk down the chapel aisle bearing banners each with one word encapsulating the tenor of the school. These one-word messages are: Honor, Discipline, Excellence and Tradition. The Scottish bagpipes that accompany the small procession signal a Scottish connection.

While John Keating, the new English teacher, does not advocate anarchy, he does encourage the boys to be free thinkers and abandon the very tradition that the school displays as one of its four core issues. Keating reads a line from a poem containing the Latin phrase, “Carpe Diem,” which means seize the day. He tells the boys that the worms await everyone – a metaphor that means everyone will die – and that each person has only a limited amount of time and to make the best of it.



There is a point/counterpoint that takes place within the story. Keating's mantra is the polar opposite of what the school administration advocates. Keating is reminded that there is a curriculum to follow. He feels that an education is learning to think independently, beyond set parameters. A fellow teacher warns him not to over promise the boys – not everyone can be an artist. Keating responds that everyone can be a free thinker.

When the boys learn that Keating had organized the Dead Poets Society when he was a student at Welton, they are enthused and want to reestablish it. When they ask him if all he and his friends did was read poetry he responds that they not only read poetry, the words dropped off their tongue like honey, they created gods and started each meeting borrowing a line from Thoreau: "live deep and suck out all the marrow of life."

Structure

"Dead Poets Society" by N. H. Kleinbaum is separated into 15 chapters and is written in a chronological order with only a few reference to past events. The time frame encompasses the fall term of a new school year. There is a change of seasons from the warm end of summer, to the beautiful foliage in the hills of Vermont in the fall and finally the heavy snows in the winter.

The story chronicles the lives of a group of junior boys who are in John Keating's English class. He is a young man and a new teacher at Welton. There are a few past references to his time at Welton when he was a student. The junior boys are inspired by the Dead Poets Society that Keating established when he was a boy. They reinvent the secret club and begin having meetings in the same cave that Keating and his peers met in.

The main sub-plots follow three of the junior boys. The threads of their stories are interspersed throughout the work. Right from the start, the author sets up a premise that pits Keating against the rest of the faculty. Keating's teaching methods are unorthodox and the school is stuffy and conventional. Naturally, being 16-year-old boys who are looking for drama and excitement, they consider Keating their hero and someone to emulate. The plot is structured with a fundamental fight of compliance versus nonconformity.

Quotes

The four pillars are the bywords of this school, and they will become the cornerstone of our lives.

-- Dean Nolan (Chapter 1 paragraph Page 3)

Importance: Dean Nolan is addressed the new students just arriving at Welton Academy. He is referring to the four pillars of success: Honor, Discipline, Excellence and Tradition.

Ah, Mr. Anderson. You have some big shoes to fill, young man. Your brother was one of our best.

-- Dean Nolan (Chapter 1 paragraph Page 9)

Importance: Todd Anderson is the new student in the junior class at Welton. Dean Nolan is not tactful in reminding Todd that his brother was “one of our best.” He’s setting up Anderson to fail if he doesn’t measure up to his brother.

I was a student at this institution many moons ago, and no, at that time I did not possess this charismatic personality.

-- John Keating (Chapter 4 paragraph Page 26)

Importance: The new English teacher Mr. Keating is stunning the boys with his casual, light-hearted attitude especially compared to their other stuffy, by-the-book teachers.

Seize the day... why does the poet write these lines? It’s because we’re food for worms, lads! Because we’re only going to experience a limited number of springs, summers, and falls.

-- Mr. Keating (Chapter 4 paragraph Page 27)

Importance: Mr. Keating is telling the boys to live each day to its maximum because everyone has just a limited time on earth. He tells them to seize the day.

Seize the day? How?’ He sighed again, ripped the page out of the notebook and threw it into the wastebasket.

-- Todd Anderson (Chapter 5 paragraph Page 33)

Importance: Todd Anderson is the new student in the junior class. He has lived under the shadow of his overachieving older brother. Todd is a lost young man who doesn’t know who he is and has no idea what his future may hold. He is expressing his frustration – he’d love to make the most out of each day but has no clue how to do so.

This is battle, boys. War! You are souls at a critical juncture. Either you will succumb to the will of academic hoi polloi, and the fruit will die on the vine – or you will triumph as individuals.

-- John Keating (Chapter 5 paragraph Page 42)

Importance: Keating lets the class know that he expects them to emerge from school as individuals – not like sheep who cave to the standards while abandoning their own ideas.

You take a big risk encouraging them to be artists, John. When they realize that they're not Rembrandts or Shakespeares or Mozarts, they'll hate you for it.' 'Not artists, George. You missed the point. Free thinkers.

-- McAllister/Keating (Chapter 6 paragraph Page 46)

Importance: Fellow teacher George McAllister has noticed Keating's unconventional approach to teaching. He warns him not to give the boys false expectations. But all Keating wants is for the boys to be independent and trust their own heads and hearts.

There is elegance in mathematics. If everyone wrote poetry, the planet would starve, for God's sake. But there must be poetry and we must stop to notice it in even the simplest acts of living or we will have wasted much of what life has to offer.

-- John Keating (Chapter 8 paragraph Page 78)

Importance: Keating constantly reminds the boys to think beyond books and classrooms. There is poetry and beauty in everything. He doesn't want the boys to miss it.

Distracted by the clapping and cheering, Dean Nolan put down his work and peered through the window at the drill-team activity below. Nolan's eyebrows furrowed as he frowned at Keating clapping and shouting to the English class. What in the world are they doing? He wondered.

-- Narrator (Chapter 9 paragraph Page 91)

Importance: Dean Nolan and George McAllister, another teacher, are starting to think that Keating's unconventional teaching methods could become an issue and a threat to the conservative institution.

My father is making me quit the play at Henley Hall. When I think about Carpe Diem and all that, I feel like I'm in prison! Acting is everything to me, Mr. Keating. It's what I want to do! I see my father's point... but he's planned the rest of my life for me, and he's never even asked me what I want.

-- Neil Perry (Chapter 11 paragraph Page 129)

Importance: Neil comes to Mr. Keating for help. Neil has a part in a play which he didn't tell his father about. His father is making him quit the play. Neil feels like his life is not his own. His father has it all planned out for him but it's not the plan that Neil wants. His father is harsh and firm and it's difficult for Neil to stand up to him.

As his friend paid him homage in the cave, Neil sat alone in his darkened room at home... The passion had dried up and left his body. All feeling was drained from his face and limbs. He believed he was a brittle empty shell that would soon be crushed by the

weight of the falling snow.

-- Narrator (Chapter 13 paragraph Page 154)

Importance: Neil has just been pulled from school by his father who is irate that Neil wants to pursue an acting career. He feels that the school and Mr. Keating are a bad influence on his son who is going to Harvard and will become a doctor.

You saw it, boy, we have the signatures of all the others. But, if you don't sign, you're on disciplinary probation for the rest of the year. You'll do work duty every afternoon and every weekend. And, if you set foot off campus, you'll be expelled.

-- Dean Nolan (Chapter 15 paragraph Page 168)

Importance: Dean Nolan is talking to Todd Anderson whose parents are in the office, too. They are all pressuring him to sign a document that essentially says that Mr. Keating's unorthodox teaching practices led to Neil Perry's suicide. Todd refuses to sign the paper. He's the only one of Neil's friends who takes that stand.