

### Visual Analysis of *Dead Poets Society*

Walt Whitman's "O Me! O Life!" presents visions of producing substance in one's life and seizing opportunities and passions. Robin Williams' character, John Keating, in the film *Dead Poets Society* brings forth new ideas to his students through poets such as Walt Whitman. The film *Dead Poets Society* was directed by Peter Weir, and written by Tom Schulman, who won an Oscar for Best Writing, Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen. *Dead Poets Society* presents the dilemma of life itself, and its loneliness and confliction within a group and individually. Male students at a nationally ranked college preparatory school are expected to follow values of tradition, intelligence, excellence and obedience. Students like Neil Perry (Robert Sean Leonard), struggle with identifying their passions. Neil faces pushback from his strict father about dreaming of becoming an actor. With the introduction of an English teacher like Mr. Keating into a dull, creatively lacking school, students' passions are brought to life, and a small group discovers the long passed Dead Poets Society. A group formed on campus during Keating's days of education, the Dead Poets Society brought young boys together to enjoy poetry and ponder questions of life in the secrecy of a cave after sneaking off of campus. The reformation of the Dead Poets Society by Neil Perry, introduces a shy new friend, Todd Anderson. Todd, played by Ethan Hawke, is less inherently mischievous in his ways due to his fear of new rigid rules. But Neil encourages him to be authentic and enjoy the feats of high school, and they form a strong, dependant bond together. In the film *Dead Poets Society*, director Peter Weir shows viewers that through connection of passions and friendship, one can experience individualistic growth and belonging in the face of great despair.

This film follows the overall growth of Neil Perry and his dreams of becoming an actor. As he gains the lead role in a play outside of his school, Neil consoles Mr. Keating about how to come to his rigid father about allowing him to perform. Neil has fought for his dreams while succeeding in school academically, but his father remains unchanged in not accepting Neil's dreams. After Neil faces the truth of his father's coldness and begins to only see a reality of force from his parents, he makes the fateful decision to end his life, with his father's handgun in their own home. Neil, though given support from his friends and mentors, suffered deep emotional conflicts about his life and future.

After seeing the emotional impact of his death on both his family and friends, a scene of Todd Anderson, one of Neil's closest friends and a boy who saw Neil as a mentor comes into frame. In a cold, dark, and blizzard filled atmosphere, the setting is haunting and uninviting. Todd stands alone as he walks ahead of the group of boys who were proud to call Neil their friend. He remains the only one with no hood protecting his face and head from the snow, seemingly careless as to what pain or discomfort comes to him now. As his friends try to provide his comfort, Todd runs alone out into the snow, wailing for his friend who had just lost his life. Director Peter Weir uses a wide shot to display how Todd feels alone, isolated, and small. The smooth motion of the cameras while Todd travels stumbling and weak, presents the distraught feelings he carries with him while the world still continues to turn, forcing him to go on. The only colors shown are black and white, the mundane, depressing feelings presented to the audience. Solemn, instrumental music in similar themes as to what the school would play at meetings or religious ceremonies, plays in the background as Todd's cries of despair are drowned out as he begins to regain his standing composure as the camera strays away from him. This

scene lacks hope for the audience and the boys, who are most commonly seen with smiles, issuing pranks and joy throughout the film.

The closest friends to Neil, those involved in the Dead Poets Society, are manipulated into signing an agreement putting blame on Mr. Keating for the suicide of Neil Perry. Neil's father initiated this belief, convincing the school it was the pushing of unrealistic dreams that led him to his unfortunate death. The boys sign the form reluctantly, for fear of expulsion or social repercussions. They are taken advantage of by their families and the school in a grave time, where they are struggling with the conflict of their close friend's death.

The last scene in the film, takes place in the very classroom Mr. Keating changed lives. An administrator of the school takes control of the English class Keating taught, and is interrupted very timely by Keating coming back to retrieve the last of his things after being terminated. Keating's most common name by the boys, "O Captain, My Captain" is called as Todd Anderson takes a stand on his desk as a parting symbol. Keating brought out free thinking and bravery in his students, and especially in Todd. He broke through the typical views they had about learning, instructing them to jump off his desk with pride and recite their own poetry with a true vision. Todd, a boy typically seen as sensitive and timid, stands alone in firm eye contact with Keating, displaying without words how much he meant to him. The camera then shoots back and forth to the faces of the other members of the Dead Poets Society, showing their hesitation and deep urge to stand alongside their friend and brother, and to show their support and regret to Keating. The second man stands firmly on his desk, even through the demands from the administrator to be seated. The remaining boys follow them to stand on their desks one by one, showing overwhelming support for Keating. Keating stands in the doorway, with a solemn smile on his face with a look of both gratitude and acceptance. There is also a sense of pride in

Todd, for being the first to rise and show inexplicable respect towards Keating for all he had done. The camera angle comes from Keating's point of view, the boys all standing, each highlighted in the cracks of one another, standing strong and tall. The music is similar to that of the scene before, sad, and a bit lonely, but much stronger. The colors, music, and camera angles are bolder, displaying the unification of these young men in standing for the same cause. The film ends on the change from all the boys to just Todd, strong in stature with compassion in his eyes.

The scenes effortlessly bring the boys together with more than just words, a languageless love connects them with Keating's doing. More than just a class and a teacher brought them together, an incredible role model taught them about true perspective, and breaking boundaries. Todd, even through the death of his friend and the loss of a great mentor, gains the ability to stand alone in his beliefs and stay true to himself. The film creates both cold and warm atmospheres, and uses personal camera angles, isolating frames, and unique colors to exemplify the feeling of both loneliness and unity.

Works Cited

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