

Dead Poets Society Viewing and Thinking Guide

This story takes place in 1959 Vermont, in a prestigious private boarding school called Welton Academy. The two focal student characters are Neil (played by Robert Sean Leonard, of *House* fame) and Todd (played by Ethan Hawke); the other main character is their new English teacher, John Keating, played by Robin Williams.

Please answer the following questions while and/or after you view the film. You may not be able to fully answer a question until after watching the entire film – be open to going back and revising your responses! Many of these questions ask for your personal reaction as someone who has navigated 12.5 years of public school – be thoughtful.

1. As the movie progresses, list as many of the referenced/quoted poems (by title, quoted line, or however else you can identify it) and/or poets/writers as you can.
2. According to the headmaster, what are the four pillars of Welton Academy's philosophy or ethos?
3. What are your impressions of Welton Academy? Does it seem like an environment you would have appreciated as a high school student? (Imagine it as an all-girls' school if you are female.) Why or why not?
4. What do the Latin words *carpe diem* mean?
5. Notice the short scene with the flock of birds. What might this scene symbolize?
6. What is the point of Mr. Keating's first class with the boys?

7. How do Todd's aspirations and his parents' plans for him differ?

8. How do Neil's aspirations and his parents' plans for him differ?

9. According to Mr. Keating, why should people read poetry?

10. What is Keating's motivation in the "barbaric YAWP" scene?

11. What does Keating teach the boys about college/life beyond Welton in the test-taking scene?

12. Mr. Keating is a graduate of Welton. How does his personality and teaching style reflect – or not reflect – his education and background?

13. From a TEACHER'S perspective, why do you think Mr. Keating has this particular group of students do things like stand on their desks, "edit" their textbooks, or have class outside?

14. You may remember learning about Thoreau, Emerson, and Whitman in your English 5/6 class. Think back – or take some time to refresh your memory through research – and consider why these writers, in particular, might appeal to Mr. Keating and his approach to teaching.

15. What is Keating's philosophy of sports? Do you agree or disagree (and why)?
16. What is Keating's advice to his students about protesting/fighting back against the system?
17. Why would the school look unfavorably upon the re-establishment of the Dead Poets Society? Do you think that Keating (as an adult) agrees with the school on this?
18. What is the motto or driving motivation of the Dead Poets Society? (Hint: it's a Thoreau quote.)
19. For what play does Neil audition and win a part?
20. After the play, Neil's response to his father's reaction is what is called "a permanent response to a temporary problem." What other option(s) did Neil have?
21. What unintended consequences do Neil's actions have for Keating and the other boys?
22. During the fall-out from the above events, what does Cameron do? Looking back at his character throughout the movie, is this an expected or unexpected response – and why?
23. In the end, who is the first student to stand on his desk? Why do you think the film's writers chose him?
24. Ultimately, which of Keating's students was the bravest? Which was the most cowardly? Why?
25. What do you think Peter Weir (the director) is trying to say about life in this movie? (Move beyond the obvious.)

SHORT ESSAY RESPONSE: Due next Tuesday (along with the rest of this packet)

Please choose any ONE of the following prompts.

Respond to it in a well-written, polished, 1-3 page essay (typed/double-spaced).

Support your claims with evidence from the movie and personal analysis.

"No poet, no artist of any art, has his 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, *The Sacred Wood*

- A. Many people consider *Dead Poets Society* to be a movie about an inspirational teacher who teaches his students to "seize the day". Careful examination, however, shows that this is not really the case. What is this movie REALLY about? (There is more than one acceptable answer – support your convictions!)
- B. During the opening ceremonies, the banners representing the four pillars of Welton Academy are carried by Cameron (tradition), Knox (discipline), and Neil (excellence). The fourth banner, honor, is carried by an unnamed boy. Why is the assignment of pillars significant/symbolic – in EACH case? Support your claims.
- C. If all four pillars of Welton were equally respected, would they be an appropriate foundation on which to build a school? (Consider whether Welton's administration actually "leans on" all of the pillars, or if they put a disproportionate importance on 1-2 of them.) If not, propose your own set of between three and six pillars that would uphold a quality education/preparation for adult life, and support your ideas.
- D. Would Neil's story have ended the way it did if he had never met Mr. Keating? Ultimately, was Keating a good or a bad influence on these boys? (This may vary depending on what each boy's true goal is... did he support them in gaining a Welton education? In preparing for life? In learning how to "seize the day"? In learning literature?) Support your claim.
- E. Consider – and do some research into – the historical period in which this story takes place. What is going on in the rest of the country/rest of the world? What is about to begin in America? What has family life been like in 1950s America, versus what it is about to become? How is this significant to the setting and story of this film?
- F. Find (it is widely available online) and read the poem, "O Captain! My Captain!" by Walt Whitman and re-read "To the Virgins, to make much of Time" by Robert Herrick. Why were these two poems highlighted in this film? How are they used to underline the movie's meaning? Make sure to give equal attention to both pieces.

This completed packet, INCLUDING THE SHORT ESSAY RESPONSE, is due on Tuesday, February 7.