

Teaching *Dead Poets Society*

JON BUCKLEY AND AMY PENDINO / JULY 3, 2002

After reading the materials required for this class, viewing the various film clips and internet web sites and considering the classroom discussions, we feel more aware and conscious of the hidden motivations of those responsible for the media messages we receive everyday. We understand that the media creates a niche and then advertises to it, and that no one really lives the way that television characters, film stars or the models in the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue do. We, as consumers, nonchalantly buy into the scenario that these slick images provide. They become idealized mental or emotional resorts to escape into; it's important to understand WHERE this stuff is coming from, WHY it's presented in a certain way and WHO is manipulating the images. The truth is that advertisers (contracted or owned by huge corporate monopolies), are creating these fantasy worlds and marketing them to the consumer.

As adults we can educate ourselves to the interrelationships of the media, and we can begin to discern patterns of behavior and connection between the various segments. But what can we do to facilitate this awareness for middle school students?

The Teasley/Wilder book brings up a good point: the literary aspects of books are the same aspects that make films come to life. Based on this idea, we thought it would be beneficial to design a film unit that would both accentuate the literary aspects of an age- and curriculum-appropriate film. In addition, we would also introduce concepts of perception and reality to a young and naïve group of beginning consumers—our seventh and eighth grade students. The purpose for this unit, therefore, is to present to students aspects and basic elements of film, and to draw a connection between similar literary and visual elements. The activities are designed both to compliment objectives (as well as practices) already in place in both of our schools, and to introduce new ideas for the enjoyment and utilization of this media form. There are pre-viewing activities, scaffolding activities, a “during-viewing” worksheet and both an objective evaluation and written response activity at the end. We've developed the prompts in such a way as to accommodate for the different ability levels and needs of our students. We believe this unit meets the high standards of curriculum required by our school districts while providing the opportunity to examine important concepts related to film.

Dead Poets Society tells a story about the impact of an imaginative and unorthodox teacher on a conservative prep school for boys in the late 1950's. This movie takes place at Welton Academy, a fictitious private prep school in Vermont which values tradition and obedience. Todd, a transfer student, meets his roommate, Neil, and several of Neil's friends. Classes seem to be dull and tedious until they meet Welton's newest teacher, Mr. Keating. Mr. Keating, a former Welton honors student, uses unique methods to teach his students about different concepts including “carpe diem.” After hearing of Mr. Keating's Dead Poets Society, Neil, Todd, Knox, Charlie, Cameron, Pitts, and Meeks reconvene DPS meetings. As the movie continues, the characters react to Keating's teaching in several different ways with many varying results. These characters begin to find themselves evaluating their lives and conditions in new ways, perhaps influenced by the new perceptions they've adopted.

Characters

It is very important to become familiar with the characters in the movie as soon as possible. This is somewhat difficult, however, because some characters look similar and the boys are usually dressed similar. Study this list of characters before the movie.

Neil: Todd's roommate; Neil's father is very controlling; Neil did summer school

Todd: Neil's roommate transferred to Welton; Todd's brother was "one of school's finest"; does not like to speak in front of people

Knox: brown hair; looks like Charlie; his father is a friend of the Danbury's; he meets Kris and falls in love

Charlie: brown hair; looks like Knox; very outgoing; sometimes says things without thinking

Cameron: short red hair; brown noser; very anal—uses ruler when writing notes

Pitts: brown hair and crew cut; reads the poem "To the Virgins, Make Much of Time"

Meeks: glasses and longer red hair than Cameron; considered to be a genius

Mr. Perry: Neil's father; tries to control Neil

Mr. Keating: English teacher; "seize the day"

Kris: blond hair; Knox calls her "Mrs. Danbury?"; is dating Chet

Chet: very spoiled; jerk; is dating Kris

Perception in *Dead Poets' Society*

The creators of commercials, books and films often use single aspects of a group to influence the audience's reactions and perceptions. Think back to a recent TV ad, for example: who is the target audience? What is being sold? How is it packaged? Will you remember it, when it comes time to make your purchase? We've talked in class about how consumers are influenced. Could the same be said for movies or TV shows?

As we view *Dead Poets Society*, we'll be stopping the film to discuss both plot developments as well as audience perceptions (ie. Why did the director have a certain character out of the shot, as we heard his voice? Why are the colors so dark, before the play? How does the lighting change when they're in the courtyard? etc.) so that we can be made more aware of devices similar to those used in advertising that are designed to influence our perceptions.

Name LA Group

Dead Poets Society Carpe Diem!

Journal Assignment #1:

Do you think that you can enjoy reading, writing, and reciting poems? Why or why not?

Do you think it is important to learn about poetry? Why or why not?

Journal Assignment #2:

Read the following quote by Professor John Keating from the movie *Dead Poets Society*. What do you think it means? Why?

We don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. And medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for."

Journal Assignment #3:

Read the following quote by Professor John Keating from the movie *Dead Poets Society*. What do you think it means? Explain.

I stand upon my desk to remind myself that we must constantly look at things a different way. The world looks very different up here . . . Just when you think you think you know something you have to look at it in another way . . . When you read, don't just consider what the author thinks, you must consider what you think.

Journal Assignment #4:

The following are pieces of poetry that are recited in the film *Dead Poets Society*. Read each selection and choose the one piece that meant the most to you. What do you think that passage meant? Why did you like this particular piece?

O Captain! My Captain!

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

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

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

To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, Old Time is still a-flying; And this same flower that smiles today, To-morrow will be dying. The glorious lamp of heaven, the Sun, The higher he's a-getting; The sooner will his race be run, And nearer he's to setting. That age is best, which is the first, When youth and blood are warmer; But being spent, the worse, and worst Times still succeed the former. Then be not coy, but use your time, And while ye may, go marry; For having lost but once your prime, You may for ever tarry. —*Robert Herrick*

O Me! O Life! O Me! O life!...of the questions of these recurring: Of the endless trains of the faithless— of cities fill'd with the foolish;... What good amid these, O me, O life? Answer. That you are here— that life exists, and identity; That the powerful play goes on, and you will contribute a verse. —*Walt Whitman*

Show me the heart unfettered by foolish dreams And I'll show you a happy man. —*Tennyson*

But only in their dreams can men be truly free It was always thus and always thus will be. —*Keating*

I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately, I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, To put to rout all that was not life and not when I had come to die Discover that I had not lived. —*Thoreau*

The Prophet

Teach me to Love? go teach thyself more wit; I chief Professor am of it... The God of Love, if such a thing there be, May learn to love from Me. He who does boast that he has been In every Heart since Adam's sin, I'll lay my Life, nay Mistress on't that's more; I teach him thing he never knew before; —*Cowley Ulysses*

...Come, my friends, 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world... for my purpose holds To sail beyond the sunset,... and tho' We are not now that strength which in old days Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are; One equal temper of heroic hearts, Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield. —*Tennyson*

Most men live lives of quiet desperation. —*Thoreau*

Dare to strike out and find new ground.

I sound my barbaric YAWP over the rooftops of the word. —*Whitman*

The Road Not Taken

...Two roads diverged in a wood And I, I took the one less traveled by And that has made all the difference. —*Frost*

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day Thou art more lovely and more temperate. —*Shakespeare*

She walks in beauty, like the night Of cloudless climes and starry skies; All that's best of dark and bright Melt in her aspect and her eyes: —*Byron*

A Midsummer Night's Dream

If we shadows have offended, Think but this — and all is mended— That you have but slumber'd here While these visions did appear. And this weak and idle theme, No more yielding but a dream, Gentles, do not reprehend; If you pardon, we will mend. And, as I am an honest Puck, If we have unearned luck Now to escape the serpent's tongue, We will make amends ere long; Else the Puck a liar call: So, good night unto you all, Give me your hand, if we be friends, And Robin shall restore amends. —*Shakespeare*

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Please return by Friday, May 31, 2002

Rosemount Middle School

May 28, 2002

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian(s),

As the fourth quarter leads us to summer vacation, 7th Grade Language Arts is focusing on poetry. We are reviewing and studying several poems and poetry terms as well as writing some poems now and in the near future. As a culminating activity for this poetry unit, we will be viewing the film *Dead Poets Society*.

This PG movie contains three particular scenes that are of adult content. First, there is a brief shot of a boy holding up a magazine with a topless woman. Second, one of the main characters goes to a party and gets drunk. Finally, one of the characters commits suicide. The suicide scene is not graphic. They do not show the body, but it is evident that the boy did commit suicide.

Dead Poets Society is a movie with many deep and powerful messages. I believe viewing it, discussing it, and writing about it will be a valuable experience for your child. It is necessary, however, to obtain parental permission for your child to view this movie. If you do not wish to have your child view this movie, alternate activities will be devised for him/her and exemption from the film will not negatively affect his/her grade.

Please return the attached permission slip to me, Ms. Pendino, by Friday, May 31, 2002. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me.

I look forward to academically challenging these students during the last few weeks of school.

Sincerely,

Amy Pendino
7th Grade Language Arts Teacher

CUT HERE

- I give my child permission to view and discuss *Dead Poets Society* in Ms. Pendino's Language Arts class.
- I do not wish to have my child view or discuss *Dead Poets Society* in Ms. Pendino's Language Arts class. I understand that this will not negatively affect my son or daughter's Language Arts grade.

Child's Name _____

Parent Signature _____