

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and *Dead Poets Society* Study Guide

Major Characters

 <p><u>John Keating</u> A former student of Welton Academy and now a teacher of English there, Keating is both inspiring and a bit eccentric.</p>	 <p><u>Richard Cameron</u> Cameron is an ambitious student who conforms totally with both the school's and his parents' expectations.</p>
 <p><u>Todd Anderson</u> Todd is a shy and introverted student who is new to Welton Academy. Todd's older brother was a previous valedictorian of Welton, and both the school and his parents clearly have high expectations of him.</p>	 <p><u>Neil Perry</u> Neil Perry is a confident and popular student who excels in his studies. He is well-liked by both his peers and teachers and is a natural leader.</p>
 <p><u>Charlie Dalton</u> Rebellious, recalcitrant and reckless, Charlie Dalton is the most extroverted and daring of Welton's students.</p>	 <p><u>Knox Overstreet</u> Shy and academically focused, Knox falls in love with Chris, with the daughter of old friends of his parents.</p>
 <p><u>Steven Meeks</u> Meeks is the most academically gifted of the boys. Though studious and compliant, he is well-liked by the others and is a strong supporter of Mr. Keating.</p>	 <p><u>Gerard Pitts</u> Tall and lanky, he is socially awkward and somewhat withdrawn.</p>

Plot Summary

The plot centers on the influence of Mr. Keating, a young and exciting English and poetry teacher at “Welton Academy,” a preparatory school in Vermont in 1959. Curious about Mr. Keating's, who is also a Welton alumnus, some of the boys uncover information regarding a secret club he helped found as a student there years ago. In reviving the club, these students decide to pursue their own desires, and to live life with the passion that Mr. Keating encourages. Ultimately, the film is about how society – as represented by the Welton establishment – whips these non-conformists with its displeasure, as Emerson would say!

Questions

1) In the first meeting of Keating's poetry class, what does he tell the boys to do with their lives?

Make their lives extraordinary.

continued on reverse

2) How do the boys' parents want them to live, and how does this connect to their decision to revive the Dead Poets Society?

Conventional lives, “high status” ones – like the parents have had or wish they’d had

3) Relate each of the following of **Ralph Waldo Emerson’s philosophies** with some element (theme, character, action, dialogue, event, etc.) of the film:

For non-conformity, the world whips you with its displeasure. (“Self Reliance”)

Students don't want to conform to what parents want

Neil – father wants him to be dr, he wants to act; father is going to put him in military school; Neil ends up dead

Keating—won't conform to the school's policies; is fired

Charlie Dalton – won't conform to society's (anyone's) rules; is expelled

Only so much do I know, as I have lived. (“The American Scholar”)

Neil – he DID live his dream before dying

Keating tried to teach the boys that they needed to make their lives matter, to leave a mark on the world (contribute a verse)

Knox experienced love for the first time and could write about his experiences

Make your own Bible. Select and collect all the words and sentences that in all your readings have been to you like the blast of a trumpet. (*Journal*)

Keating tried to get the boys to relate what they learned in class to real life.

The Dead Poets Society chose the poetry that meant the most to them as individuals

The only way to have a friend is to be one. (“Friendship”)

Todd became a friend to Neil after Neil befriended him.

Friendship is a main theme in the film—and the betrayal of friendship. The boys should never have had Cameron in their group (notice he's the only one ALWAYS called by his last name); he was never really a friend to them.

4) Relate each of the following of **Henry David Thoreau's philosophies** with some element (theme, character, action, dialogue, event, etc.) the film:

... I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. (*Walden*)

Neil DID live his dream before he died. the question is, is that enough? His life was pretty short. Did he make a mark, or is personal satisfaction what matters?

Throughout the film, the boys experience more than they ordinarily would in life at Welton. Neil's death is part of that, and one way to look at it is that they will now approach literature from the point of view of one who has experienced grief as well as love and friendship.

"If a plant cannot live according to its nature, it dies; and so a man." ("Civil Disobedience")

Of course this applies most to Neil. The most obvious relationship is that he couldn't live as he wanted to, so he ended up dead. BUT he didn't survive mainly because he couldn't be independent.

If [a law or rule] is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. ("Civil Disobedience")

At the end of the film, Todd is threatened with expulsion, but he keeps standing up anyway because he does not want once more to be an agent of injustice to Keating. Charlie was never an agent of injustice. He refused to name the DPS members and to sign the paper because those actions – although ordered by the administration – would have made him an agent of injustice to Mr. Keating.

Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine. A minority is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight. ("Civil Disobedience")

The actions of the boys standing on the desks and calling out "O Captain, My Captain" at the very end do just this. The school cannot expel them all as Nolan threatens. It really cannot expel 13 or so kids. They are a tiny minority out of the 400 or so kids at the school, but they are sizeable enough that Nolan can't make good on his threat to expel anyone who has an "outburst."

6) Does Neil's fate show that Emerson's and Thoreau's philosophies (and/or those of Mr. Keating) are wrong? Explain.

No, Neil didn't kill himself because Emerson or Thoreau advocated suicide. They advocated individuality over conformity. Neil needed to have a bigger "world" than his father. As Keating said, once he was out of school he could do anything he wanted. His father couldn't force him to go to Harvard—they wouldn't take a student who didn't want to enroll! But Neil could not imagine being independent and self-supporting. That's why he felt "trapped" and killed himself.

Does Neil's final decision show that he learned nothing from Keating or the literature they read? Explain.

Possibly—he made his life more short than extraordinary. Literature is supposed to show us the possibilities of life, which Neil didn't seem to believe could be his. On the other hand, before he died, he did what he'd always wanted to do.

If Neil had really followed Thoreau's philosophy, what would he have done instead? (What might his other options have been if he wanted to live in a way that was true to himself?)

He would have been independent, and (in Emerson's words) self-reliant. He would have left his home, found a temporary place to stay, taken a job—any job he could find. He could no longer have expected his father's material, financial support.

7) How can Mr. Nolan's and the school administration's forcing the boys to sign the paper blaming Mr. Keating for Neil's fate be seen as an example of Emerson's statement that "for non-conformity, the world whips you with its displeasure"?

They were basically being punished only for non-conformity. They were easy targets because they stood out. Keating was an easy scapegoat for the same reasons.

8) Why can Todd properly be seen as the film's main character? What happens to him that does not to anyone else in the film?

Todd changes. At first, he was a conformist ("How are you going to be in a play if your father won't let you?"; but by the end he is perhaps the bravest of the non-conformists ("O Captain, My Captain!"))