Issues of Modernity in Dead Poets Society

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://commons.colgate.edu/car/vol6/iss1/5
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In “Challenge of Modernity” we have read groundbreaking works that ask us to rethink the way we look at the world. We have examined controversial paintings and sculptures and pondered what the artists were trying to say. In choosing a work to add to the Modernity curriculum, I considered what we discussed in class and thought of what I’d read or seen that dealt with similar issues. While rereading my notes on Nietzsche, I was strongly reminded of one of my favorite movies: Dead Poets Society. Not only does this movie deal with issues of Modernity, it examines the classroom, the roles of teacher and student, and what should be taught and how to teach it. It is for these reasons that I suggest Dead Poets Society be added to the Modernity curriculum.

Dead Poets Society takes place at the Welton Academy for boys in 1959, where the students are taught the virtues of “tradition, honor, discipline and excellence”. The new English teacher, John Keating, is hardly traditional. His radical teaching methods delight his students but shock the faculty. Inspired, one group of boys, led by Neil Perry, decides to revive the club Keating founded when he was a student, called The Dead Poets Society. They meet in a cave to read poetry and find a new appreciation for the art form. Following Keating’s command to “seize the day” (carpe diem), Neil stands up to his controlling father, and another boy confesses his feelings to the girl he loves. Even after the tragic death of one of the boys, the break-up of the club, and Keating’s dismissal, the students remain loyal to their teacher and the lessons he taught them.¹

Keating’s interpretation of carpe diem is mixture of two ideas Nietzsche references in On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life: memento mori and memento vivere.² Memento mori means to remember you must die; memento vivere, remember to live. Keating uses the knowledge of inevitable death to spur his students to live a full life. On his first day teaching, Keating takes his class into the hallway to look at a display case full of pictures of students from years past. “These boys are now fertilizing daffodils,” he tells them. “Believe it or not, each and every one of us in this room is one day going to stop breathing, turn cold, and die.” He urges, “Make your lives extraordinary.”³ Nietzsche laments that being conscious of death causes “hopelessness” and an aversion to anything new or different;⁴ Keating embraces the new and makes that consciousness beneficial to life.

3. *Dead Poets Society*.
4. Nietzsche, 44.
Nietzsche’s *memento mori* is burdensome; Keating’s is liberating. Carpe diem is also similar to Nietzsche’s idea of the unhistorical. Nietzsche describes an unhistorical outlook as “being able to forget”; in other words, to live life entirely in the moment. For Keating, carpe diem is not so much forgetting history as living life in spite of it. Never mind that you will one day die; make the best of your life as you can today. Keating does encourage his students to participate in history; he tells them: “The powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.” Keating wants his students to own their role in history in a way Nietzsche might very well approve of. His attitude toward history avoids many of the problems Nietzsche describes in his essay.

The elite prep school setting of *Dead Poets Society* easily links to Nietzsche’s “exhausted hens” analogy. Nietzsche compares the rapid ingestion and regurgitation of knowledge to hens “forced to lay eggs too quickly.” The rigorous curriculum at the school puts stress on the students, but the most striking example of a slavish commitment to knowledge is Neil Perry’s father. When Neil first arrives at Welton, his father informs him that his is taking too many extracurricular activities and he must drop one. Neil’s father wants nothing more than for his son to go to college and become a doctor, and he will let nothing stand in the way of that, not even his son’s unhappiness with the plan. For Mr. Perry, everything, even enjoying life, must be secondary to success. This is the lifestyle that Nietzsche warns against, the very opposite of Keating’s.

Prep school life as portrayed in *Dead Poets Society* is very structured and regimented. Students’ days are tightly scheduled, they have a long list of rules to follow, and they are beaten when they disobey. They are the embodiment of the lack of spontaneity Nietzsche says occurs with an excess of history. This can even devolve into a loss of personality and self-confidence. Nietzsche writes:

> So the individual becomes timid and unsure and may no longer believe in himself: he sinks into himself, into his inner being, which here only means: into the heaped up chaos of knowledge which fails to have an external effect, of teaching which does not become life.

It is this loss of self that Keating seeks to help his students avoid. He encourages them to follow their dreams and to think for themselves. One student, Todd Anderson, arrives at Welton shy and unsure of himself. He is the only member of the Dead Poets Society that refuses to read aloud at the meetings. When Keating asks his students to write an original poem and read it to the class, Todd doesn’t do the assignment. Keating brings Todd to the front of the room and shows him a photo of Walt Whitman. He asks Todd to describe what he sees, “even if it’s total disclaimer.

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5 Nietzsche, 9.
6 *Dead Poets Society*.
7 Nietzsche, 42.
8 *Dead Poets Society*.
9 *Dead Poets Society*.
10 Nietzsche, 28.
11 Nietzsche, 29.
gibberish.” Todd does, and before he knows it, more words fly out of his mouth and he’s written a poem. Keating has a talent for boosting students’ self-confidence and helping them find their gifts. He wants to ensure that they do not become “only machines that think, write and talk.”

If there are a striking number of similarities to Nietzsche's essay apparent in Keating’s teaching style, it may be because John Keating is a critical historian. For Nietzsche, there are three types of history: monumental, antiquarian, and critical. He describes critical history as “dragging [history] to the bar of judgment, interrogating it meticulously and finally condemning it.” When Keating arrives at Welton, he alters the curriculum to suit his needs, sometimes rejecting parts of it altogether. During one lesson Keating asks a student to read aloud from the first page of their poetry textbook, which describes a scale for rating the greatness of a poem. When the student finishes reading, Keating asks the class to rip out that page. He then has them rip out the entire introduction, to the horror of a teacher who is passing by the room. In contrast to the school’s emphasis on tradition, Keating tells his students: “We must constantly look at things in a different way.” For Keating, nothing is sacred, not even the time-honored curriculum of Welton.

When we look at the way women are portrayed in Dead Poets Society, it is clear that this film speaks to some of the gender issues we have discussed in class. The few women that appear are often accompanied by men; Griselda Pollock observes a similar phenomenon in some impressionist paintings, as she writes in her article “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity.” Often the women of Dead Poets Society are somehow being manipulated: Chris, the girl Knox Overstreet is in love with, is dating Chet Danburry, a football player widely considered to be a jerk; Charles Dalton arrives at one Dead Poets Society meeting with a girl on each arm, neither of whom seem to be aware that they are being used. Though women of the 1950s certainly were not unintelligent, the idea that they were confined by the will of men is at least partially accurate.

Some of the themes of gender and family life in To the Lighthouse are apparent in Neil’s relationship with his family. The strained father-son relationship of Neil and Mr. Perry parallels the animosity between James Ramsay and his father, though Neil seems to fear his father more than he hates him. Neil’s mother appears in a scene near the end of the movie that recalls the difficulty Mrs. Ramsay has with expressing her feelings. Neil took a part in a play even though his father forbid him to; after the play goes up, Neil’s father takes him home and informs him that he is being withdrawn from Welton and enrolled in military school. While her husband and son argue, Mrs. Perry does little more than look at her

12 Dead Poets Society.
13 Nietzsche, 30.
14 Nietzsche, 21.
15 Dead Poets Society.
17 Dead Poets Society.
18 Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse (San Diego: Harcourt, 1927), 4.
son with tears in her eyes.\textsuperscript{19} In To the Lighthouse, when Mr. Ramsay wants his wife to say she loves him, she can't; not because she doesn't love him, she insists, but because “she never could say what she felt.”\textsuperscript{20} Perhaps Mrs. Perry wanted to tell her son that she loved him, but could not find the words; it is also possible that she was held back by the will of her husband.

Dead Poets Society asks us to examine how we live and how we learn, two things any student should be concerned with, and especially college students. We should aspire to be free thinkers, and this movie chronicles students on the path to freeing their minds. Making the most of the one life we are given is another honorable lesson to be learned from this film. A Modernity curriculum that includes Dead Poets Society would be one that encourages students to engage themselves in their learning and constantly seek new perspectives. It is poignant, thought-provoking movie that begs to watched, discussed, and watched again, each time coming out of it with new insights and inspirations.

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\textsuperscript{19} Dead Poets Society,
\textsuperscript{20} Woolf, To the Lighthouse, 123.
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