Dead Poets Society

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF N. H. KLEINBAUM

Nancy Kleinbaum studied English at Northwestern University. In the 1970s and 80s, she worked as a freelance writer and journalist for a number of magazines before being offered a chance to write a novelization of the popular Robin Williams film *Dead Poets Society* in 1989. Kleinbaum was tasked with adapting a draft of the screenplay for the film in the form of a short novel; her novelization was published a few months before the film was released. Kleinbaum has written a number of other books, many of them children's books or novelizations of other films. Currently she writes for a host of different magazines, and lives with her husband and children in New York.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While the novel is set in the insular world of Welton Academy, it alludes to the radical changes in American society in the late 50s and early 60s. It's no coincidence that the novel is set in 1959, at the dawn of a new decade. The 1950s are often regarded as a time when conformity and homogeneity overtook American culture—large chunks of American society cherished the same patriotic values and believed that the "good life" consisted of marrying, getting a job, and living in the suburbs. The 60s, by contrast, are often regarded as a decade of radical social change—the era when diverse groups of people, many of them young, educated students, mobilized to oppose what they saw as the injustice of their society and won key victories in civil rights in the process. The novel arguably alludes to 60s radicalism through Charlie's advocacy for admitting women to Welton Academy, and perhaps through the novel's ending, in which Todd and his classmates practice a form of "nonviolent resistance" much like that which Martin Luther King, Jr. would use later in the 1960s.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The novel fits in with a long line of novels, short stories, and films about boarding school life. Some of the first notable novels about boarding schools were written during the Victorian period; notably, Charles Dickens' 1839 serial novel *Nicholas Nickleby* is partly set at a boarding school. In the 20th century, there were many American novels about east-coast boarding schools—perhaps the most famous is *A Separate Peace* (1959) by John Knowles, which shares *Dead Poets Society*'s themes of coming-of-age and institutional repression. Also, the novel alludes to many other poems and authors, most notably the great 19th century poet Walt Whitman. For Keating, Whitman is a symbol of rebellion and freedom. In Whitman's most famous collection of poems, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), he writes, "I celebrate myself and sing myself," a line that's been taken by many (not just Keating) to represent the author's courageous individuality.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Dead Poets Society
- **When Written:** 1988-89
- **Where Written:** Los Angeles, California
- **When Published:** Fall 1989
- **Literary Period:** It's especially hard to classify the novel as belonging to any literary period, since it's a novelization of a film. However, it's interesting to note that the *Dead Poets Society* novelization fits in with the decade-long "wave" of novelizations and other movie tie-ins. Throughout the 1980s, film studios invested more money in marketing movie tie-ins, from board games to toys to books. To the extent that Kleinbaum's novel fits in with any artistic era, perhaps that "era" is the movie tie-in boom of the 1980s.
- **Genre:** Coming-of-age novel, period piece, boarding school novel
- **Setting:** Welton Academy, Vermont, 1959
- **Climax:** Neil's death
- **Antagonist:** Headmaster Nolan, Richard Cameron, Mr. Perry, and the abstract spirit of conformity that dominates Welton Academy itself could each be considered the novel's main antagonist.
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Novelization Nancy. *Dead Poets Society* isn't the only novelization Kleinbaum wrote—she's also penned novelizations of such 80s films as *Dirty Dancing* and *D.A.R.Y.L.*

Seize the day! The most famous line, both from the *Dead Poets Society* film and Kleinbaum's novelization, is "Seize the day, lads. Make your lives extraordinary." Twenty-five years later, the line is still widely quoted, inspiring all sorts of people to take risks and be great.

PLOT SUMMARY

The novel is set in 1959 at the prestigious Welton Academy, a Vermont boarding school. As the school year begins, we meet Todd Anderson, a shy new student who's transferred from

another school, as well as Neil Perry, Richard Cameron, and Charlie Dalton—all junior-year students. Neil Perry is a likable, kind student, and is Todd's roommate; Neil is terrified of his own father, Mr. Perry, who insists that Neil must study chemistry, go to Harvard, and become a doctor. Richard Cameron is an uptight, conforming student who hates breaking rules; Charlie Dalton, on the other hand, is an easygoing, rebellious student who loves breaking rules.

Another Welton student and friend of Neil's, Knox Overstreet, goes to have dinner with some family friends, the Danburrys. During dinner, he meets Chris Noel, the beautiful girlfriend of Chet Danburry, the Danburrys' son. Knox is instantly smitten, but doesn't know what to do about his love.

Classes begin at Welton. Most of the teachers are extremely rigorous and controlling. However, there's a new English teacher at school, John Keating, who is different. Keating immediately impresses his students with his charismatic, energetic lectures—in the first of which he **stands on his desk**. While other teachers force students to do homework and obey them at all times, Keating begins the year by talking about "Carpe Diem," the idea that humans should "seize the day"—i.e., make the most of life while they're alive. This year, Keating promises, he wants to teach his students how to be extraordinary instead of simply following the rules. Keating's unusual teaching methods draw some attention from his colleagues, but because he's an intelligent, likable man, he stays in the good graces of the Welton headmaster, Gale Nolan.

Neil tries to engage with Todd and become his friend, but Todd is too shy and reserved. Things begin to change when Neil comes across an old yearbook in which he learns that John Keating was once a student at Welton; during that time, Keating was a member of a club called the Dead Poets Society. When Neil and his friends ask Keating about the Dead Poets, Keating explains that the Dead Poets met in a cave near Welton, read poetry, and celebrated life. Later, Neil finds that someone, presumably Keating, has put an old poetry anthology marked "Dead Poets" in his room. Neil convinces his friends, including Knox, Cameron, Charlie, and Todd, to go to the cave, and together they read from the poetry anthology, gradually becoming transfixed by the poems' beauty.

In class, Keating asks his students to compose poems. Todd is at first unable to write anything that he feels comfortable reading in from of the other students, but with Keating's encouragement, he improvises a brilliant poem about Keating's hero, Walt Whitman. Afterwards, Todd begins to open up, both with his classmates and with Keating. He admits to Neil that he feels that his parents don't love him—they're incredibly hard on him, and clearly prefer his older sibling. Neil is sympathetic to Todd's problems, since they echo his own. Keating's lessons also inspire Neil to try out for a local production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*–to his delight, he gets the lead part of Puck.

The students' attempts to "seize the day," inspired by Keating, become increasingly reckless and foolish. Charlie Dalton pens an article in the school paper in which he claims that women should be admitted to Welton, and signs it "The Dead Poets." To protect his classmates, Charlie comes forward and admits he wrote the article—he's given corporal punishment by Nolan, but doesn't tell Nolan anything about the Dead Poets Society. Meanwhile, Knox is invited to a party with Chris and Chet—at the party, he gets very drunk and, telling himself that he's just "seizing the day," he touches Chris's breasts, infuriating Chet. In response to his students' wild actions, and the suspicion he's been getting from Nolan, Keating tries to teach his students how to be realistic, "survive" college, and bluff their ways through essays about horrible books that aren't worth reading.

Mr. Perry finds out that Neil is going to be in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and furiously forbids him from performing in the play. Neil, unsure what to do, goes to Keating for advice. Keating advises Neil to talk to his father and show him how passionate he is about acting. Neil can't bring himself to talk to his father, but tells Keating that Mr. Perry gave him permission to perform after all.

Knox goes to Chris's school and reads her a poem he wrote for her, in which he professes his love. Later, Chris visits Knox at Welton and warns him that Chet is going to kill him for what he's done. Knox begs Chris to go see *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with him—if she doesn't have a good time, he'll never try to see her again. Reluctantly, Chris agrees.

Chris, Knox, Keating, and the other Dead Poets go to see Neil in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Neil is spectacular as Puck, to everyone's delight, especially Todd. Chris begins to develop feelings for Knox during the performance—and later that night, she kisses Knox. After the show, however, Mr. Perry appears to confront Neil. He brings Neil home and tells him that he'll be going to a rigorous military academy from now on—clearly, Welton is distracting him from his "goals" of being a doctor. Neil is so upset by this news that, late at night, he shoots himself with his father's revolver.

In the aftermath of Neil's suicide, there's an investigation, at Mr. Perry's request, into the matter. Cameron betrays the Dead Poets by going to Nolan and telling him about the Dead Poets Society. Nolan uses Cameron's information to cast Keating as a scapegoat—by blaming Keating for "corrupting" Neil with talk of freedom and individuality, Nolan hopes to avoid a full-scale scandal with Welton's wealthy alumni donors.

One by one, the students are brought into Nolan's office and forced to sign a document stating that Keating corrupted them with his free-thinking lessons, and thereby compelled Neil to commit suicide. While most of the Dead Poets sign the document, Todd refuses to do so—and Nolan places him under strict probation for refusing to go along. In spite of Todd's loyalty, Keating is fired from Welton and essentially barred

from ever teaching again.

In the final chapter, the students file into English class, now being taught by the dull Headmaster Nolan himself. In the middle of the lesson, Keating walks in to pick up his personal items. While Keating gathers his things, Todd runs up to him, explaining that Nolan forced the students to sign the document that's gotten Keating fired. Keating smiles and nods, showing that he understands. Todd stands on his desk, just as Keating did during his first lesson at Welton. Slowly, and despite Nolan's cries to stop, the other students join Todd in an inspiring show of solidarity with Keating.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

John Keating – John Keating is the charismatic, energetic English teacher who inspires the students of Welton Academy to rebel against their families and other teachers. His name echoes that of John Keats, the famous English Romantic poet whose celebration of life and originality may have inspired Keating's own. A former student of Welton, as well as a brilliant Rhodes scholar, Keating begins teaching at Welton in 1959 and immediately makes an impression on his students, who aren't used to such exciting, fascinating lessons. Keating urges his students to "seize the day"—that is, do extraordinary, original things instead of merely imitating their teachers and parents. His example inspires the students to revive a secret society of which Keating was once a member—the Dead Poets Society. Keating's emphasis on freedom and originality raise many eyebrows at Welton, a school that celebrates tradition above everything else. When his students begin to fight back against the Welton administration more and more overtly, Keating tries to convince his students to be more reserved and cautious in their behavior—significantly, he urges Neil Perry to talk to his father about his love for acting. After Neil's tragic suicide—brought about in part because Neil did *not* talk to his father—Keating is blamed for "corrupting" his students, and fired from Welton.

Todd Anderson – Todd is a new student at Welton, having transferred from another, less prestigious school. He doesn't get along with his parents, who, he feels, favor his older, more academically successful brother, Jeffrey Anderson. At Welton, Todd is at first quiet and shy, but with the encouragement of John Keating and the friendship of Neil Perry, his roommate, he learns to open up, express his feelings, and compose impressive poetry. Todd is arguably the most "dynamic" character in the novel: his transformation from a shy conformist to a bold iconoclast epitomizes the novel's rebellious spirit and coming-of-age themes.

Neil Perry – Neil Perry is a popular, idealistic student at Welton, and one of Keating's most loyal disciples. As Todd Anderson's roommate, Neil is instrumental in inspiring Todd to be bolder and more confident. For his own part, Neil is highly intimidated by his father, Mr. Perry, and yearns to find a way to rebel against his family. In John Keating, Neil thinks he's found a model for rebellion. Neil decides he's going to become an actor, and gets a part in a school Shakespeare production, lying to his father in the process. When Mr. Perry finds out the truth, he's so furious with Neil that Neil shoots himself with his father's revolver, sure that his family will never support his dreams. Neil's death sets in motion the final chapters of the novel, in which Welton Academy tries to find a suitable scapegoat for his death. In all, Neil Perry is a tragic example of how Keating's love of freedom and art can go terribly wrong—Neil is arguably more rebellious than Keating himself, to the point where he's willing to sacrifice his own life for the sake of his beliefs.

Charlie Dalton – Charlie is a student at Welton, and comes from a rich, successful family. He's more openly disobedient than his Welton peers, although for most of the book, he's shown to be just as frightened of his parents as his classmates are of theirs. Under the guidance of John Keating, Charlie experiments with drinking, dancing, wooing women, and generally rebelling against the stiff, overly repressive atmosphere at Welton Academy. Charlie is one of Keating's most loyal followers, to the point where he's arguably more interested in rebellion and nonconformity than Keating himself is. As the novel ends, Charlie is expelled from Welton for punching Cameron and refusing to compromise in his loyalty to Keating.

Knox Overstreet – Knox is a thoughtful, romantic student at Welton. Over the course of the novel, he falls in love with Chris Noel, the girlfriend of a family friend's son. Knox's first attempts to woo Chris are disrespectful at best and assaultive at worst; he even gropes Chris at a party. Later on, Knox tries to use the poetry and eloquence he's learned form John Keating to woo Chris, and his efforts largely pay off. As the novel ends, Knox and Chris seem to be dating and very much in love.

Richard Cameron – Richard Cameron (who just goes by "Cameron") is a stiff, overly obedient student at Welton, and one of the novel's most overtly villainous characters. Unlike his classmates, Cameron is skeptical of John Keating from the very beginning, and he echoes Headmaster Nolan's criticisms of Keating. While Cameron attends meetings of the Dead Poets Society, he does so very reluctantly, since he's terrified of being caught and expelled from Welton. After Neil Perry's suicide, Cameron distances himself from the Dead Poets and informs on his classmates, ensuring that Keating is fired.

Headmaster Gale Nolan – The headmaster of the prestigious Welton Academy, Nolan is a severe, strict man, who governs Welton with an iron fist and has boundless respect for the school's tradition. Nolan hires John Keating following the retirement of another teacher. While he thinks highly of Keating at first, Nolan begins to doubt Keating's

unconventional methods, and after the suicide of Neil Perry, Nolan seemingly has no qualms about firing Keating to avoid a scandal at Welton.

Mr. George McAllister – A Latin professor at Welton, and a colleague of John Keating, McAllister is shown to be highly skeptical of Keating's unconventional teaching methods, despite finding them enjoyable and entertaining. While McAllister seems to be one of Keating's few friends among the Welton teachers, he distances himself from Keating after the death of Neil Perry.

Mr. Perry – Neil Perry's severe, demanding father, Mr. Perry, is an intensely practical man, whose highest priority is Neil's success in school. Mr. Perry is skeptical of Neil's extracurricular interests, since he thinks that Neil's goal in life should be to become a doctor. When Neil begins to show interest in acting, Mr. Perry forbids his son from performing on any stage again—a prohibition that leads directly to Neil's suicide. In spite of his intimidating behavior, Mr. Perry is shown to be a devoted father, who sincerely believes that he's doing his son a favor by forcing him to concentrate on academics.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mr. Portius – The elderly English teacher who retires from Welton Academy, setting in motion the plot of the novel.

Alexander Carmichael – The oldest living alumnus of Welton Academy, who makes an unintelligible speech for the beginning of the school year.

Chet Danburry – The spoiled, arrogant son of the wealthy Danburry family, and, for most of the novel, Chris Noel's boyfriend.

Virginia Danburry – Chet Danburry's 15-year-old sister, who later takes a part opposite Neil Perry in a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and begins to date Charlie Dalton.

Chris Noel – A beautiful young woman who is dating Chet Danburry at the beginning of the novel, but who eventually leaves Chet for Knox Overstreet.

Dr. Hager – Welton Academy's strict, severe math teacher.

Steven Meeks – A friendly, intelligent Welton student who joins the Dead Poets Society after being inspired by John Keating's lessons.

Pitts – A Welton student who joins the Dead Poets Society after being inspired by John Keating's lessons.

Mrs. Nolan – The wife and secretary of Headmaster Gale Nolan.

Jeffrey Anderson – The older brother of Todd Anderson.

Mr. Danburry – Chet Danburry's father, and a friend of Knox Overstreet's father.

Mrs. Danburry – Chet Danburry's mother.

Tina – A Welton "townie" who accompanies Charlie Dalton to a meeting of the Dead Poets Society.

Gloria – A Welton "townie" who attends meeting of the Dead Poets Society and later kisses Charlie Dalton.

Mr. Anderson – Todd Anderson's father.

Mrs. Anderson – Todd Anderson's mother.

Mrs. Perry – Neil Perry's mother.

Walt Whitman – Great 19th century American poet whose radical works, including "Song of Myself" and "O Captain! My Captain!" were deeply inspirational to many of the 20th century's most iconoclastic writers and thinkers, as well as John Keating.

William Wordsworth – English Romantic poet.

John Dryden – 17th century English poet and humorist.

W. E. Henley – 19th century English poet whose short inspirational poem, "Invictus" is quoted in the novel.

Vachel Lindsay – Early 20th century poet whose works are often celebrated for their chant-like quality.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

LIFE, DEATH, AND "CARPE DIEM"

The most famous quote in *Dead Poets Society* is "carpe diem," which means "seize the day" in Latin. Professor John Keating delivers these words to his students on the first day of school at Welton Academy, symbolizing his unorthodox approach to education and his desire to inspire his students to "make their lives extraordinary." It's important to understand what Keating means by "seize the day," what kinds of lives Keating wants his students to live, and how Keating's philosophy of life is different from that celebrated at Welton Academy.

Right away, Keating's words ring true to his students because they represent an alternative to the ideas they're used to hearing from their teachers and parents. At the prestigious Welton Academy, the students are indoctrinated to believe in a simple, straightforward model of how to live their lives. Students are expected to work hard, follow the rules, go to good colleges, find lucrative jobs, marry and have children, and eventually raise these children in the same manner that they were raised themselves. Essentially, all Welton boys are supposed to obey the same rules and live more or less the same life, just as their fathers did before them, and their fathers'

fathers before them.

In stark contrast to the cyclical, "one size fits all" philosophy of life that Welton offers its students, Keating's philosophy of life is grounded in one simple fact: we are all going to die. On the first day of class, Keating tells his students that one day, no matter what kinds of people they become as adults, they're going to be "food for worms." In other words, where Welton Academy sees sameness as the basic condition for a good life (that is, obeying the same rules and desiring the same things as everyone else), Keating sees sameness as the basic condition of death—i.e., something to fight against. Therefore, he argues, a good life should resist sameness and blind conformity. Because life is all-too short, students should make the most of their time on the earth. The best way to make the most of life is to be creative and original—to seize the day—and not simply to repeat one's parents' and grandparents' lives. In short, Keating's goal as an educator is to teach his students to think for themselves (see Education theme): to explore their passions and live accordingly.

The tragedy of *Dead Poets Society* is that some of Keating's students misinterpret his celebration of life, originality, and the "carpe diem" mindset to mean that a life *without* creativity and originality is worthless and not worth living. Neil Perry, one of Keating's most eager disciples, begins a career as an actor, inspired by his teacher's encouragement to "seize the day." But when his father, Mr. Perry, finds out that Neil has been neglecting his studies for theater, he forbids Neil from performing, and Neil is so distraught that he kills himself. Neil's tragic mistake is to twist Keating's idea, "because we're going to die, let's live life to the fullest," into a far grimmer idea: "because we can't live life to the fullest, we should die."

Keating's "carpe diem" philosophy is, above all, a celebration of life over death. While Neil's misinterpretation of "carpe diem" leads to his death, Keating inspires many of his other students to lead lives structured around their own unique passions, ignoring the dictums of their parents and other Welton teachers.

EDUCATION

As its boarding school setting would suggest, *Dead Poets Society* is in large part a novel about education. The book articulates two competing theories about how young people should be educated: first, the process of rote memorization and blind obedience practiced by most teachers at Welton Academy (the "Welton way"); second, the process of training students to think for themselves (the "Keating way").

At Welton, students are trained to obey authorities and internalize whatever knowledge their teachers deem fit to pass on to them. According to the "Welton way," education consists of an older, more experienced teacher passing on specific information to a classroom of younger, relatively inexperienced students. Therefore, the ideal Welton student will obey authority without question, memorizing Latin, trigonometry, history, etc. But although the Welton way defines education as the internalization of specific pieces of information, education itself is just a means to an end: i.e., a way for Welton students to go to a good college and later get a good job. The Welton way isn't designed to foster any real passion for knowledge whatsoever; rather, it's designed to produce graduates who will go on to make lots of money.

The "Keating way" of educating students, by contrast, is designed to get young people to think for themselves. Content-wise, Keating's classes stress the idea that a "good life" must be structured around one's unique passions, not society's rules. Similarly, Keating's theatrical, sometimes over-the-top methods push students to think originally and independently. He lets his students **stand on desks**, walk around the schoolyard, yell in class, and generally break out of their old, familiar habits at school. The goal of these seemingly frivolous exercises is to train students to "un-learn" their blind obedience to Welton, and to authority in general. Keating believes that students have innate passions and talents—his job, then, isn't to pass on information to his students, but rather to help them cultivate the abilities they already have.

As many critics have pointed out, however, it's not clear that Keating really trains his students to think for themselves at all. He tries to use humor, performance, and wit to train his students to think freely, but it seems likely that he's just training his students to worship him. It's telling that the novel shows Keating analyzing specific poems only once—he claims that he wants his students to love poetry, but in fact, he seems to want his students to love *him*. In short, one could argue, Keating's students become blindly loyal to Keating where before they were blindly loyal to Welton. While such an interpretation of *Dead Poets Society* may be beyond Kleinbaum's authorial intent, it's important to keep in mind. There is a potential contradiction in the notion of teaching students to think originally (how can you *teach* originality?), and at times, Keating seems to fall prey to such a contradiction, his theatricality as much of a barrier to free thought as the other Welton teachers' dullness.

CONFORMITY AND SUCCESS

The first scene of the novel conveys the preeminence of conformity at Welton Academy: Welton's students dutifully file into the chapel, dressed in the same school blazers and reciting the same "four pillars" of success at Welton (tradition, honor, discipline, excellence). In a way, conformity—the blind emphasis on sameness and repetition—is the real villain of *Dead Poets Society*. It's important to understand where conformity comes from and why it has the potential to be so dangerous.

The four pillars of Welton—tradition, honor, discipline, and excellence—are different aspects of the same conformist model of success, a model that by definition can't work for everyone. Both in school and in life, Welton students are ordered to follow the same rules. Ultimately, the point of following the rules is to achieve "success," but only in the narrow, material sense of getting good grades, going to a good school, and finding a high-paying job. In this way, the four pillars of Welton are designed to force students to aspire for the same kinds of success—and, essentially, to become the same people.

At times, the novel is sympathetic to the idea of conformity—there are, after all, times when it's good to follow the rules and pursue the same kinds of success that other people have achieved. Mr. Perry, the father of Neil Perry, a Welton Academy student, seems to genuinely care about his son, even if he expresses his love through the language of conformity and discipline. Mr. Perry, it's implied, comes from a poor family, and so wants his son to have the best life possible—and as he sees it, this means forcing Neil to do well in school, go to Harvard, and become a prosperous doctor. So one clear advantage of "success" as Welton defines it is that it produces students who can support themselves financially, find challenging, fulfilling work, and raise a family.

Nevertheless, the novel is mostly skeptical of Welton's model of success, because it forces young people to conform to rules that don't work for everyone, a state that often produces more misery than happiness. The ultimate goal of studying hard and following the rules, one would think, is that it produces lasting happiness. But, as the novel emphasizes again and again, many of the students of Welton, as well as their parents, are conspicuously unhappy. Students hate their parents for micromanaging their lives and forcing them to study hard. By the same token, the parents of Welton students have become so obsessed with the idea of making their children "successful" that it's overshadowed their natural affection for their children. (In the novel, not a single parent of a Welton student is portrayed positively.) Ultimately, conformity has no psychological or spiritual "payoff"—it just produces more conformity. The same could be said of Welton's understanding of success—students are trained to achieve "success for the sake of success," not for their own happiness.

At the end of the novel, we see the moral bankruptcy of Welton's celebration of success and conformity. After Neil Perry's suicide, the Welton headmaster, Gale Nolan, scrambles to find a teacher to blame for the tragedy. In the end, he holds John Keating responsible for Neil's suicide, and fires him from the school. As the students of Welton recognize right away, Nolan doesn't really blame Keating for Neil's death at all—he just wants to avoid a scandal that would jeopardize Welton's alumni relations, and therefore its status as an elite, "successful" school. This suggests that Welton's emphasis on "conformity for the sake of conformity" is even more sinister than it appears: Nolan is more concerned with his own professional success than with right and wrong or the welfare of his students. Ultimately, the novel shows that Welton's overemphasis on conformity produces shallow, morally blind, deeply unhappy people.

REBELLION AND PASSION

Faced with the crushing conformity of boarding school life, John Keating inspires many of his students to rebel against the repressive, sometimes tyrannical culture at Welton Academy. The students' rebellion takes many different forms, some internal ("freeing their minds" from conformity) and some external (drinking, sneaking off campus, playing pranks, etc.). At the end of the novel, we see an extreme form of rebellion against conformity and repressiveness: Neil Perry's tragic suicide. In general, the novel draws an important distinction between rebellion for the sake of rebellion and rebellion grounded in sincerity and passion.

In his earliest lessons at Welton, Keating underlines a concept that lies at the core of any fruitful rebellion against conformity: passion. A good life, he argues, is a passionate life, lived according to the individual's unique talents and interests. Discovering one's own unique talents, he implies, can take a lifetime—but doing so is inherently worthwhile because it yields true, fulfilling happiness. By the same token, Keating suggests that the lives of many adults are unsatisfying because they lack any true passion: people go through life without feeling love, whether for art, work, or other people. Keating's lessons suggest that true rebellion must be personal before it becomes external: for example, an adult who gives up an unsatisfying job to pursue his passion is "rebelling" against society, without using violence or interfering with other people's lives. Put another way, rebellion against the *status quo* has to be the result of passion, not the other way around.

As Keating's students learn more and more from him, they're inspired to rebel against their parents and against the Welton administration. But many of the students also misinterpret Keating's ideas, celebrating rebellion for its own sake. Keating's students seem more interested in rebelling *against* their parents and teachers than in standing up for what they're truly passionate about. For instance, Charlie Dalton pulls an elaborate prank on Headmaster Nolan, seemingly for no other reason than that he wants to embarrass Nolan in front of the entire student body (Charlie claims to be standing up for women, but his claim is not very convincing—see "Men, Women, and Love" theme.) Keating later reprimands Charlie for his actions, suggesting that pranks and similar kinds of rebellion can be harmful when motivated by childish destructiveness, rather than sincere conviction. In general, many of Keating's students mistake the thrill of disobedience for genuine passion.

Keating's lessons in non-conformity and "seizing the day" could

be interpreted as inciting rebellion, but ultimately, Keating is really a moderate figure. He wants his students to stand up for what is right, but also get along with their parents and teachers by communicating openly and honestly. Most of all, Keating wants his students to "rebel" against society in a personal, individual way: by altering their thinking, pursuing their sincere passions, and sharing these passions with other people. Keating encourages his students to get along with their teachers and parents: he encourages Charlie to exercise caution at Welton, and urges Neil Perry to talk to his father about his love for acting instead of going behind his father's back. Though the novel ends in a tragedy of passion (Neil's suicide, which is based in his love of acting and rebellion against his father), it seems that many of the other students ultimately take Keating's real lessons to heart, rebelling against Nolan by **standing on their desks**, but only as a sincere show of solidarity with Keating himself.

MEN, WOMEN, AND LOVE

Dead Poets Society is set at Welton Academy, an all-boys school. Furthermore, it takes place from 1959 to 1960—an era when the feminist movement was causing big changes in American society. So it's no surprise that the novel has a lot to say about the relationships between men and women—in particular, between young men and young women.

Almost without exception, the relationships between men and women that *Dead Poets Society* depicts are romantic in nature. The male students of Welton Academy, especially Knox Overstreet, talk frequently about their desire for women. Because Welton is an all-boys school, women take on a near-mythic status in the students' eyes: Welton students (at least the ones we're introduced to in the novel) have so little experience interacting with young women that they think of women as mysterious, sublime, foreign creatures. John Keating's lessons then appeal to his students' conceptions of women, without challenging these conceptions in any way. He claims that one of the key uses of poetry is to "woo women," and even suggests that in college, the women his students will meet will be "delectable" (not intelligent, independent, articulate, etc.). Unsurprisingly, the novel shows Keating's disciples, especially Charlie Dalton and Knox Overstreet, using poetry to seduce the women to whom they're most attracted.

The problem with such a view of women and poetry—and, one could argue, a major problem with the novel itself—is that it depicts women as objects whose only purpose is to be "won" by any means necessary: a viewpoint that is arguably quite sexist. Inspired by Keating's talk of "wooing women," the Welton students give in to their immature, clumsy desires, disrespecting women in the process. Most offensively, the novel shows Knox Overstreet using Keating's "carpe diem" ideas to justify groping his crush, Chris, at a party—a scene that's played for laughs of the "boys will be boys" variety (as Knox gropes Chris, he tells himself, "carpe diem" and "carpe breastum," a clear example of how Keating's lessons shape his thinking). Indeed, Knox later succeeds in "wooing" Chris with poetry and literature, and his molestation is hardly condemned. Knox's fault, the novel strongly implies, isn't that he takes advantage of a young woman's body—it's that he romances the young woman sloppily. In general, the novel seems to agree with the basic premise of Knox, Charlie, and the other Welton students' view of women: women are passive muses, with limited subjectivity or independence, meant to be seduced (or at times, conned) into love. As another example, Charlie Dalton pens an op-ed about how women should be admitted to Welton—seemingly an assertion based in a desire for gender equality—but instead he simply argues that women are necessary for male students' sexual gratification.

The overt sexism of the Welton students is more than just a moral problem for the book—it arguably represents a problem with Keating's teaching methods, as the novel glorifies them. Keating wants his students to "seize the day," and thinks his job is to teach them how to think for themselves and trust their own innate genius. But of course, the problem with telling a group of sexually frustrated teenage boys (all of whom, it's assumed, are heterosexual and just trying to act like "real men") to "trust in themselves" is that they might treat women disrespectfully.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE CANDLE

At the beginning of the novel, during the commencement day ceremony at Welton Academy, a single candle is lit and used to light other candles. This process, it's explained, is supposed to symbolize the light of knowledge being passed form one generation to the next. The novel will explore how teachers pass knowledge to their students—not just forcing them to regurgitate the same knowledge over and over, as the candle metaphor might suggest, but encouraging them to think independently.

PUCK'S CROWN

During his performance as Puck from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Neil Perry wears a crown of flowers on his head—and before he kills himself, Neil put on his crown. The crown of flowers might allude to a famous Biblical symbol, the crown of thorns that Jesus Christ was forced to wear before being executed. Just as "crown of thorns" has become a

symbol of suffering and sacrifice, the crown of flowers suggests the way that Neil will sacrifice his life for the love of art and beauty.

STANDING ON THE DESK

In John Keating's first and last scenes in the book, characters stand on desks in his classroom: in his first scene, he stands on the desk, and in the final scene, his students do—an apt symbol for how Keating passes on his own spirit and wisdom to his young disciples. Standing on the desk, as Keating says explicitly in the book, symbolizes seeing the world from another point of view; that is, challenging traditional ideas and stereotypes in order to be free.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Hyperion edition of *Dead Poets Society* published in 2006.

Chapter 1 Quotes

Sixteen-year-old Todd Anderson, one of the few students not wearing the school blazer, hesitated as the boys around him rose to their feet. His mother nudged him up. His face was drawn and unhappy, his eyes dark with anger. He watched silently as the boys around him shouted in unison, "Tradition! Honor! Discipline! Excellence!"

Related Characters: Todd Anderson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

In the first chapter, we're introduced to Todd Anderson, one of the novel's main characters. Todd immediately stands out from his peers because he's not wearing the Welton Academy blazer, symbolizing his outsider status among the other students (both literally, because he's transferring from another school, and figuratively, since he's uncomfortable around his peers). Todd and the other Welton students are in the middle of their yearly convocation ceremony, during which the Welton students obediently shout out the four "pillars" of Welton—the values that supposedly make a Welton education so important. Essentially, the four pillars are a set of rules for the students to obey: the pillars demand that the students study hard (excellence), obey authorities (discipline), tell the truth to the authorities (honor), and respect Welton itself (tradition).

So the passage conveys the vast importance of rules at Welton—as an elite prep school, Welton prioritizes order and obedience in its student body. Todd is evidently skeptical of the four pillars, as evidenced by his scowl—or at least is skeptical of the shouting and the uniform nature of the whole ceremony. It's also worth noting that his mother has to "nudge him up"—the only reason Todd's here at all is because, like so many of the other Welton boys, his parents are pressuring him hard to fit their ideas of a "successful" son.

The audience rose to a standing ovation as the octogenarian haughtily shunned offers of help from those beside him and made his way to the podium with painstaking slowness. He mumbled a few words that the audience could barely make out, and, with that, the convocation came to an end.

Related Characters: Alexander Carmichael

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

Welton is an elite private school that celebrates tradition for the sake of tradition. The novel is set in 1959, Welton's centennial, emphasizing the importance of tradition and the past at Welton. And yet the novel also shows the emphasis on tradition at Welton to be feeble, ineffectual, and ultimately impotent. Here, the Welton headmaster invites Welton's oldest living graduate to speak before the students. If Welton's education is so valuable, one might expect the speaker to be highly persuasive, charismatic, or otherwise visibly happy. Instead, the speaker's speech is dull and almost incomprehensible.

The message appears to be that Welton's education—supposedly the recipe for a good, fulfilling life—is actually a ticket to a long, dull existence without any real wisdom about the world, let alone real pleasure.

Chapter 2 Quotes

As the other boys stared at him, Todd fought back tears. "You'll like soccer here, Anderson. All right, boys. Dismissed."

Related Characters: Headmaster Gale Nolan (speaker),

Todd Anderson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Todd Anderson, who's new at Welton, goes to see the headmaster, Gale Nolan. Nolan assigns Todd his extracurricular activities, including soccer. Todd doesn't enjoy soccer, and would prefer to do rowing, but doesn't have the courage to argue to Nolan why he'd prefer some other sport. Nolan speaks over him and insists, "you'll like soccer here."

The passage is a good example of how the strict emphasis on rules and obedience at Welton limits the students' freedom and happiness. Nolan assigns extracurriculars for his students, instead of allowing his students to select their own—meaning that, even outside of academia, Nolan exerts tremendous power over the way his students live their lives. By the same token, Todd's inability to contradict Nolan proves his shyness and reluctance to stand up for himself. Todd hates the repressive atmosphere at Welton, and the fact that he's so reluctant to stand up for himself when he first arrives at Welton might suggest that his family life is similarly repressive. But he's not brave enough to take control over his own life—yet. For now, he swallows his anger and goes along with Nolan's orders.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ His eyes raging, Mr. Perry hissed at his son. "I will not be disputed in public, do you understand me?"

Related Characters: Mr. Perry (speaker), Neil Perry

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Neil Perry, one of the novel's main characters, gets a visit from his strict father, Mr. Perry. Mr. Perry informs Neil that he's taking too many extracurricular activities—Neil must resign from some of his extracurriculars and concentrate on his academics instead. Mr. Perry thinks that he has the right to decide what Neil does and doesn't do with his time—furthermore, he won't stand Neil arguing with him about his right to do so.

In short, Mr. Perry is the living, breathing embodiment of the repressive atmosphere at Welton Academy. The students who attend Welton are already used to strict rules and tyrannical authority in school, because they've been putting up with these things from their own parents for years. The passage is particularly important because it shows that Neil has a lot in common with his roommate, Todd Anderson—in fact, one could say, the one thing that unites all Welton students together is the fact that they're used to being bossed around by adults.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ He jumped dramatically onto his desk and turned to face the class. "O Captain! My Captain!" he recited energetically, then looked around the room.

Related Characters: John Keating (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, we're introduced to John Keating, the charismatic English teacher who inspires the students of Welton to "seize the day." Keating immediately makes an impression on the students by standing on his desk—a vivid contrast with the stiff, reserved way most of the other Welton teachers conduct their lessons (not to mention the dull, incomprehensible speech that Alexander Carmichael, Welton's oldest living graduate, gave at the beginning of the year).

From the very beginning, then, Keating aims to disrupt his students' expectations and force them to think for themselves. This certainly doesn't mean that Keating is an anarchist—from the passage, it's very clear that Keating still wants his students to listen to him, obey him, and respect him as their educator. In essence, Keating still wants to be the students' teacher—he just wants to be a different kind of teacher, hence his desire to be called "O Captain! My Captain!", an allusion to the poetry of Walt Whitman, rather than the usual "Mr." It's also worth noting that Whitman's poem is about Abraham Lincoln, the American President who, Whitman claims, was cruelly murdered in spite of working tirelessly to help his people—perhaps foreshadowing the way that Welton will cruelly fire Keating, in spite of everything he's done for his students.

Did most of them not wait until it was too late before making their lives into even one iota of what they were capable? In chasing the almighty deity of success, did they not squander their boyhood dreams? Most of those gentlemen are fertilizing daffodils now!

Related Characters: John Keating (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

John Keating begins his lesson by urging his students to "seize the day"—that is, to make the most of their lives. Keating's point, as articulated here, is that the students simply don't have that much life to live. Though they're young, and feel as if they're going to live forever, they're all going to die someday. Keating reinforces his point by showing his students old photographs of former Welton graduating classes—just about everyone in the photographs is "fertilizing daffodils" now, he says.

Because life is short, Keating argues, it is a huge mistake to accept other people's definitions of success. Most of the students at Welton have been told—both by their families and their teachers—to believe in the same narrow definition of success, tied to a high salary, a family, and a good job (for example, Neil Perry's parents tell him again and again that he's going to be a doctor). Keating wants his students to think for themselves and discover their own definitions of success—because, as we've already seen from Neil and his peers, the traditional definition of success isn't particularly fulfilling or satisfying for many people.

Chapter 5 Quotes

Keating grabbed onto his own throat and screamed horribly. "AHHHHGGGGG!!" he shouted. "Refuse! Garbage! Pus! Rip it out of your books. Go on, rip out the entire page! I want this rubbish in the trash where it belongs!"

Related Characters: John Keating (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Keating teaches a class in which he asks his students to read the introduction from their English textbook. In the essay, an academic writes about how to "measure" the greatness of a poem mathematically. In the middle of the essay, Keating begins to cry theatrically, showing that he despises the essay for its narrow, dull understanding of poetry. He makes a show of telling his students to rip the essay out of their textbook. The point seems to be that poetry can't be analyzed scientifically, as the essay would have its readers believe. Instead, poetry must be experienced on a visceral, emotional level—it must be read with passion. Keating wants his students to rebel against tradition, conformity, and the stiff, scientific approach to education, epitomized in the essay—and this is why the Welton administration ultimately considers him a danger.

He stood silent at the back of the room, then slowly walked to the front. All eyes were riveted on his impassioned face. Keating looked around the room. "What will your verse be?" he asked intently.
The teacher waited a long moment, then softly broke the mood. "Let's open our texts to page 60 and learn about Wordsworth's notion of romanticism."

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the chapter, John Keating comes to his central point: the purpose of the students' lives is to "contribute a verse" to the grand poem of life—in other words, to making a lasting, meaningful, and, above all, original contribution to the world. While other teachers (to say nothing of the students' parents) try to ensure that the students' contributions are essentially the same (becoming, for example, doctors and lawyers), Keating doesn't try to tell his students *what* to do at all; all he asks is that his students choose their path in life freely, rather than simply doing what their parents order them to do.

The passage is a good example of some of the contradictions in Keating's role as a teacher (some of which the book explores, some of which it doesn't). Keating is a charismatic professor, but by and large, his most memorable actions are either 1) not directly related to literature at all (standing on a desk, for example) or 2) reactions to how *other* people interpret literature (as in the previous quote). How, exactly, would somebody like Keating go about actually teaching poetry—how would he talk about specific lines of poetry, and what level of academic rigor would he bring to these analyses? It's very telling that the chapter

ends at the exact instant when Keating is about to start lecturing about a specific poet, Wordsworth—we're left to imagine what form the lesson will take. Critics of *Dead Poets Society*, both the book and the movie, have argued that Keating isn't really teaching his students to love poetry at all—he's just teaching them to love *him*.

Chapter 6 Quotes

"Ah," McAllister laughed, "free thinkers at seventeen!"
"I hardly pegged you as a cynic," Keating said, sipping a cup of tea.
"Not a cynic, my boy," McAllister said knowingly. "A realist! Show me the heart unfettered by foolish dreams, and I'll show you a happy man!"

Related Themes:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of the only passages in the novel when two teachers stop and chat about teaching. George McAllister, the strict Latin teacher, has witnessed one of Keating's lessons, and he's bemusedly skeptical of Keating's wild, free approach to teaching. When Keating claims that his goal is to get his students to think for themselves, McAllister scoffs: the goal of a teacher of teenagers should be to impart information, not to inspire impulsiveness.

The passage establishes the basic tension between Keating's teaching methods and those used by most of the other teachers. Welton Academy is designed to prepare students for "success" in life, albeit a narrowly defined version of success that includes, basically, going to an Ivy League school, becoming a doctor or lawyer, and, eventually becoming a Welton alumni donor. While McAllister sincerely believes that he's doing his students a favor by forcing them to be realistic and grounded, Keating seems to think that training students in this way just makes them soulless and fundamentally unhappy. Instead, he opts for a riskier but perhaps ultimately more fulfilling strategy: teaching his students how to discover their own values and passions—in short, their own versions of "success." Keating believes that this strategy—dismissed by McAllister as "foolish dreams"—is the surest way to lead young minds to happiness.

Chapter 7 Quotes

The point is that for the first time in my whole life I know what I want, and for the first time I'm gonna do it whether my father wants me to or not! Carpe diem, Todd!

Related Themes:

Page Number: 63-64

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Neil thinks he's stumbled upon his passion: acting. Although his father, Mr. Perry, wants him to become a doctor, Neil wants to be an actor. Thus, he's signed up for a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Neil has clearly been inspired by John Keating's lectures: just as his teacher urged him to do, Neil has tried to find his true passion in life and "seize it" as soon as he can.

It's definitely worth noting that Neil thinks he's discovered his "passion" before he actually performs on a stage, making us wonder whether Neil can really know that he wants to act for the rest of his life. Considering how much pent-up resentment Neil has for his father, it seems entirely possible that Keating has just supplied the sparks necessary to prompt Neil to rebel in whatever way feels most meaningful to him.

Chapter 8 Quotes

"I feel like I've never been alive," Charlie said sadly, as he watched Neil go. "For years, I've been risking nothing. I have no idea what I am or what I want to do. Neil knows he wants to act. Knox knows he wants Chris."

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Dead Poets—a group of impressionable Welton students who've been inspired by John Keating to read poetry together in secret—talk about their problems in life. The passage is highly illuminating, for a few different reasons.

Charlie Dalton, the wealthy, repressed student who's speaking here, notes that he's never felt alive because he's never risked anything. Charlie's observations could apply to any number of other Welton students. At Welton, the students are trained for the same kind of success: a good

education, a respectable job, a nice family, etc. This kind of success can certainly be rewarding, but it's not much of a risk—on the contrary, it's "tried and true" (Welton has been churning out Ivy Leaguers for 100 years, after all). Because the "Welton model" is so predictable and traditional, it leaves many unsatisfied. Charlie wants to find his own path in life—a path that risks failure and humiliation, but which may ultimately lead to greater happiness.

The passage also alludes to two other students' passions, as if these passions are the "answers" to those two students' problems: Knox Overstreet thinks that because he loves Chris Noel, he has a reason to live; Neil Perry thinks that acting is his reason for living (before he's ever appeared in a play). It's never entirely clear if the book takes Neil and Knox's beliefs at face value, or if it questions them a little (Knox and Neil's "reasons for living" seem a little shallow, particularly since neither one of them knows much about what they're striving for). So even if Keating is right to inspire his students to strive for their dreams, perhaps one danger of his "carpe diem" philosophy is that it encourages his repressed, unsatisfied students to gravitate to the first halfway-rebellious pursuit they encounter. In short, the Dead Poets might be more interested in rebellion than in their passions.

❝ Todd stood still for a long time. Keating walked to his side. "There is magic, Mr. Anderson. Don't you forget this." Neil started applauding. Others joined in. Todd took a deep breath and for the first time he smiled with an air of confidence.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, we see Keating at his most inspiring. He's asked his students to compose a poem—when it's Todd's turn to read his poem, he admits that he didn't write one. He's so shy and insecure that he believes anything he writes will be bad. So Keating pushes Todd to improvise a poem. To everyone's surprise, including Todd himself, Todd composes a brilliant poem about Walt Whitman. After he's finished, Todd smiles confidently—he's discovered that he's brighter and more talented than he thought.

Keating's methods are interesting because, unlike most of the other teachers at Welton, he isn't forcing Todd to learn any specific lessons—there's no information that Keating expects Todd to recite back to him. Instead, Keating is trying to get Todd to access his own innate talent—the talent that Todd already has within himself, but that his parents and other teachers have suppressed. In all, Keating doesn't think of himself as passing on knowledge to his students, but he *does* think of himself as a teacher. A teacher's job, as he sees it, is to help students harness their own creativity and talent—and in this scene, Keating succeeds in doing so.

❝ "God, I can't take it anymore! If I don't have Chris, I'll kill myself!"

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Knox, another Welton student, dramatically acknowledges the depths of his love for Chris Noel, the beautiful young woman whom he's met only once before. Knox claims that if he doesn't "have" Chris, he'll kill himself. This quote contains the first mention of suicide—albeit only half-serious—in the book. Knox isn't genuinely suicidal; he's just using hyperbolic language to describe his feelings. But his words foreshadow Neil Perry's suicide later in the novel. And perhaps there's a serious point here: the boys' passions (whether for Chris Noel or for acting) cause them a lot of misery, because they seem so difficult to achieve, even if those passions are ultimately worth striving for.

Knox's word choice also seems important: Knox speaks of "having Chris," perhaps betraying the not-too-subtle sexism of his desires. Knox barely knows Chris, and he certainly doesn't understand her personality. Transfixed by her beauty, he thinks he's entitled to "have" her—suggesting that he thinks of her as a prize to be won, not a three-dimensional human being. Knox's words don't make him sound like a mature, passionate adult who knows what to strive for in life; they make him sound like an immature, repressed teenager who *thinks* he's found his purpose in life because he's never tried to find his own purpose before.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ "You know what Dad called me when I was growing up? 'Five ninety-eight.' That's what all the chemicals in the human body would be worth if you bottled them raw and sold them. He told me that was all I'd ever be worth unless I worked every day to improve myself. Five ninety-eight."

Related Themes:

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Todd Anderson opens up to Neil Perry about his family situation. Todd's parents are harsh and strict with him: from an early age, they've trained him to think of himself as a "product" to be sold and improved over time; indeed, they train him to think of his worth as a literal, mathematical number. In doing so, Todd's parents are trying to prepare him for a life spent doing what others tell him to do. Because Todd has been taught to value himself only in the most literal, objective sense, he seems destined to pursue a path in life that leads others to value him—going to a good school, getting a good job, etc.

The fact that Todd is opening up to Neil about his family, however, suggests that he's beginning to rebel against his family's values. Inspired by Keating, Todd refuses to accept other people's "values"—instead, he'll craft his own and make his own path in life.

I'd like to announce that I've published an article in the school paper, in the name of the Dead Poets Society, demanding girls be admitted to Welton, so we can all stop beating off.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94-95

Explanation and Analysis

In this (somewhat unpleasant) passage, Charlie Dalton tells the Dead Poets that he's taken matters into his own hands, publishing an article in the school paper in which he (in the name of the Dead Poets) argues that women should be admitted to Welton Academy. Charlie's position isn't unreasonable at all—indeed, it fits with the novel's historical period, since in the late 50s and especially the 1960s, many of the basic institutions of American life, not just schools, were beginning to admit women for the first time. Nevertheless, the terms of Charlie's argument seem immature and offensive—the way he puts it, women should be admitted to Welton for male students' sexual pleasure, not because women deserve good educations (if there's anything more to Charlie's argument, we're not informed of it).

As with other quotes from *Dead Poets Society*, it's not entirely unclear to what degree the novel sympathizes with Charlie's behavior—whether he's heroically seizing the day or just being an immature teenaged boy. Rebellion is important, but perhaps Charlie is too blindly enthusiastic in his rebellion, and too willing to sacrifice respect and maturity for rebellion's sake. Keating says that responsible adults need to learn how to balance freedom and responsibility, and here, Charlie seems to upset that balance.

Chapter 10 Quotes

Suddenly, he turned toward Chris again. He melted as his emotions took over. "Carpe breastum," he said to himself, closing his eyes. "Seize the breast!"

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Knox Overstreet is attending a party at the Danburry house. He gets very drunk and winds up sitting on the couch next to Chris Noel, his crush, and Chet Danburry, Chris's boyfriend. As he sits on the couch, Knox tries to pluck up the courage to "express" his love to Chris. But he does so in the most vulgar, offensive way—grabbing Chris's breast while she's kissing Chet.

Chapter 10 is full of examples of Keating's students "crossing the line"—becoming so enamored with the idea of rebellion that they sacrifice their maturity and dignity, and make fools of themselves. Knox barely knows Chris (he's met her once before) and seemingly has no real romantic experience with women at all. Here, he perverts Keating's lessons into the horrible idea that he should be able to "seize" whatever, and whoever, he wants.

While the novel clearly doesn't support Knox's actions, it arguably presents these actions as amusing "gaffs," not the offensive, objectifying behaviors they are (the fact that Chris eventually begins dating the drunk teenager who groped her at a party is especially disturbing).

Charlie held the receiver out to Nolan. "It's God. He said we should have girls at Welton," Charlie said into the phone as a blast of laughter from the students filled the old stone chapel.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 105-106

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Chris Dalton practices something like "civil disobedience" in the middle of a meeting in the Welton chapel. Gale Nolan, the headmaster, has gathered all Welton students there to investigate the source of the newspaper article arguing for admitting women to Welton. Charlie tops his earlier prank with an even bigger prank, claiming that "God" wants to admit women, too.

Charlie's prank is designed to disrespect as many Welton fixtures as possible—organized religion, all-boys admission, and even Headmaster Nolan himself. His actions seem admirable to the extent that they're motivated by the sincere desire to admit women to Welton, though based on earlier quotations, it seems likely that Charlie wants women to attend his school for the worst possible reasons. Furthermore, we see Charlie "seizing the day" not because of a sincere conviction or personal passion, but just to be rebellious and show off in front of his peers.

"There is a place for daring and a place for caution, and a wise man understands which is called for." Keating said. "But I thought …" Charlie stammered.
"Getting expelled from this school is not an act of wisdom or daring. It's far from perfect but there are still opportunities to be had here."

Related Themes:

Page Number: 110-111

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Keating clarifies the lessons he's trying to teach his students. Headmaster Nolan has just punished Charlie for disrespecting him in public. Charlie insists that Keating inspired him to act out against the Welton administration—Keating's urgings to "seize the day" inspired him to think for himself and challenge authority. But Keating claims that he never intended for his students to act like Charlie has. On the contrary, Keating wants his students to balance daring and caution. There's a time for rebellion, and there's a time for obedience.

Keating's clarifications are importance, because they help us understand how he defines "happiness" and "the good life." Some of Keating's most enthusiastic pupils have interpreted his words to mean, "rebel against everything." Keating, however, distrusts his students' impulsive, rebellious behaviors, because they're motivated by a love of rebellion for its own sake or by a desire to cause chaos, rather than by any genuine passion. Instead, he wants his students to take their time before committing to their passions and beliefs—in other words, to exercise caution, especially when the consequences could be dire (like being expelled altogether).

Chapter 11 Quotes

"Yes, and acting!" Neil bubbled. "It's got to be one of the most wonderful things in the world. Most people, if they're lucky, live about half an unexciting life. If I could get the parts, I could live dozens of great lives!"

Related Themes:

Page Number: 116-117

Explanation and Analysis

As Neil spends more and more time rehearsing for his part in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, his passion for acting deepens. Neil's reasons for loving acting are very interesting—by performing, he argues, one can live many different lives simultaneously; one can impersonate different people and "sample" their lives without committing to any one of them. Neil's remarks seem indicative of the passion Keating has been trying to pass on to him and the other students: more than anything else, Neil loves acting because it allows him to enjoy life to the fullest—arguably the most basic lesson Keating tries to teach.

It's worth wondering why, if Neil is only discovering his true passion for acting *now*, what motivated him to sign up for the play in the first place. A likely answer would be that Neil had always wanted to act, but also wanted a way of rebelling against his strict, tyrannical father. Neil's acting career began as an instance of rebellion, but it has now evolved into a sincere love for the craft of acting—a passion that Neil feels gives his life meaning.

"What is wrong with old habits, Mr. Overstreet?"
"They perpetuate mechanical living, sir," Knox maintained. "They limit your mind."

Related Themes:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is perhaps the most concise example of how Keating's lessons can be misinterpreted to the harm of the student body. Knox Overstreet has taken to eating his dinner with his non-dominant hand; when pressed to explain himself, he insists that he's eating with his left hand because habits are limiting and mechanical.

It's certainly possible to praise Knox for his original thinking—one could argue that he's trying to "shake things up" and inspire himself to see the world in new, exciting ways. But the way Knox explains himself to Dr. Hager in this passage suggests that he takes a somewhat immature pleasure in contradicting his superiors. Knox, along with some of his classmates, seem to be gravitating toward the idea that originality and rebellion are inherently good (when in fact, there are good, solid reasons why people eat with their dominant hands!). Keating's point was never that students should be "against it, whatever it is," Groucho Marx style—on the contrary, students should weigh both old and new, tradition and rebellion, and decide for themselves what to do. In a way, rebelling against all traditions is just as blind and narrow-minded as dogmatically accepting all traditions.

"Talk to him, Neil," Keating urged.
"Isn't there an easier way?" Neil begged.
"Not if you're going to stay true to yourself."

Related Themes:

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Neil Perry goes to Keating for advice. Mr. Perry has discovered that his son is going to perform in a play—something he doesn't approve of. He forbids Neil from performing, even though opening night is tomorrow. Neil is furious with his father, and asks Keating for help thinking through the situation. Keating's advice is for Neil to try to communicate some of his passion to his father—he's sure that if Neil can make his father see what acting means to him, his father will give in and allow Neil to perform (particularly because Neil's grades haven't suffered because of the play). In the end, though, Neil doesn't talk to his father, and instead just performs in the play against his father's wishes—a rash decision that tragically leads to his suicide.

Keating encourages his students—not just Neil—to be bold and original, but ultimately he also wants them to be happy and to get along with others (especially their families). The reason Keating encourages Neil to talk to his father is that Keating wants Neil to be honest about his passions, instead of hiding them from his family forever.

Chapter 13 Quotes

"You have opportunities I never dreamed of!" Mr. Perry shouted. "I won't let you squander them." He stalked out of the room.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 142-143

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mr. Perry confronts his son, Neil, about his performance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Neil has disobeyed his father by performing in the play—getting rave reviews for doing so. Now, Mr. Perry is furious with Neil for daring to go behind his back.

The passage shows Mr. Perry at his most overtly villainous—and yet also, his most sympathetic. Mr. Perry, the stereotypical overbearing parent, uses Neil as a way to live his own life. Because Mr. Perry himself never had great "opportunities" for himself (we're told that he's from a poor family, so presumably he never attended a school like Welton), he uses his son as a way to experience these opportunities vicariously—never a good quality in a parent.

And yet there's a more sympathetic side to Mr. Perry's words. Even if he can be overbearing with Neil, it's suggested that he does sincerely want the best for his son—it's just that he has one particularly rigorous definition of what "the best" means (going to Harvard, being a doctor). Mr. Perry thinks that the best way to make his son happy in life is to give him financial independence and a good education—he can't understand that Neil has found other, far more fulfilling, sources of happiness.

Chapter 14 Quotes

"Damn it, even if the bastard didn't pull the trigger, he ..." Todd's sobs drowned his words until, finally, he controlled himself. "Even if Mr. Perry didn't shoot him," Todd said calmly, "he killed him. They have to know that!"

Related Themes:

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Todd has just discovered that his friend and roommate, Neil Perry, shot himself with his father's revolver. Todd is distraught at the news, and not just because his friend is now dead. Todd is so upset that he immediately begins to blame Mr. Perry for the accident. Todd doesn't know all the details of the matter, but he does know that Neil quarreled with his father about his love of acting—a love that Mr. Perry was unwilling to accept. He's sure that Mr. Perry's refusal to accept his son's choice of a profession was what drove Neil to suicide.

Todd's reaction to Neil's death is notable because he's so desperate to *blame* someone for the accident. In this way, his reaction foreshadows the final chapter of the novel, in which the Welton administration will, sure enough, blame someone else for the suicide—Keating. Even if blaming Mr. Perry isn't an entirely fair reaction to the suicide (it's not like Todd has all the information, though he's making a very serious accusation indeed), it gets at the heart of what was the matter with Neil. Neil was a sad, repressed young man—highly intelligent, desperate to be independent, but still very much under the control of his family. Keating inspired Neil to find an avenue for expressing himself—performance—and then Mr. Perry took away that avenue. In essence, Keating made Neil happier than he'd ever been, and then Mr. Perry made Neil more miserable than he'd ever been.

"Cameron's a fink! He's in Nolan's office right now, finking!"
"About what?" Pitts asked.
"The club, Pitts. Think about it." Pitts and the others looked bewildered. "They need a scapegoat," Charlie said. "Schools go under because of things like this."

Related Themes:

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

As the novel comes to a close, the Welton administration begins to investigate the matter of Neil's suicide. Headmaster Nolan is eager to make Keating the "fall guy" for Neil's suicide, for a number of reasons: Keating is a new teacher, meaning that it's easier to fire him; there's evidence suggesting that Keating inspired his students to act out and be independent, meaning that blaming him for Neil's suicide is halfway credible (though ultimately untrue); and finally, Mr. Perry already despises Keating.

Notice that Nolan is willing to place the blame on Keating for many different reasons—but *not* because doing so is the "right" thing to do. For all Nolan's talk of the importance of values and grand traditions at Welton, he's motivated by a far simpler and crasser motive: keeping the money flowing. As Charlie points out, Nolan wants to keep Welton from "going under"—he wants to ensure that parents keep sending their children to his school (and paying full tuition!). So ultimately, the passage shows the celebration of "tradition" at Welton for what it truly is: a smokescreen for the constant process of tuition payment and alumni donation that keeps those supposedly noble but ultimately meaningless traditions from "going under."

Chapter 15 Quotes

It is Mr. Keating's blatant abuse of his position as a teacher that led directly to Neil Perry's death.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Headmaster Nolan tries to get Todd Anderson to sign a document stating that John Keating is responsible for the death of Neil Perry. According to the document, it was Keating's unconventional teaching style that drove Neil to be reckless and disobedient to his family—therefore, Keating "killed" Neil.

Morally, Nolan's document is a sham. In no sense could Keating be considered responsible for a student's suicide. He inspired Neil and his other students, giving them tremendous happiness, and a sense of independence they'd never felt before. Keating also encouraged Neil to communicate openly with his father—and if Neil had only followed Keating's advice and talked to his father about his love of acting, it's suggested, he wouldn't have been driven to suicide.

Instead of conclusively proving that Keating is to blame for Neil's death, the document reflects the guilty conscience of the entire Welton administration. Welton produces repressed, tightly wound students who seem successful but are secretly miserable. Nolan doesn't have the honesty to

admit the truth about his own school; in his view, any teacher who tries to lead his students away from Welton's rules and traditions must by definition be a bad teacher. It's likely that Nolan doesn't believe in his own document—he's just trying to avoid a full-scale scandal by scapegoating Keating, the most unique teacher at Welton, and therefore the easiest target.

> As Nolan started down the aisle toward him, Knox, on the other side of the room, called out Mr. Keating's name and stood up on his desk too. Nolan turned toward Knox. Meeks mustered up his courage and stood up on his desk. Pitts did the same. One by one, and then in groups, others in the class followed their lead, standing on their desks in silent salute to Mr. Keating.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

In the final scene of the novel, Keating's former students—now being taught by Headmaster Nolan—see Keating one final time. Keating has come back to his classroom to collect his personal things, and sees his students in the middle of a long, dull lesson—exactly the kind of lesson he tried to avoid. Then, one by one, Keating's former students stand on their desk in a show of loyalty and solidarity with Keating.

The scene shows the novel coming full circle from Keating's first appearance in the book. Keating began his school year by standing on his desk in order to inspire his students to think differently. Now, it is *Keating* who stands on the ground and his students who stand on their desks. The message is clear: despite being fired, Keating has successfully inspired his students to be free thinkers.

The passage is also interesting to think about in the context of the 1960s (the novel begins in 1959, and the final scene of the book takes place at the first months of the 1960s). The 1960s are still regarded as an era of radical social changes that challenged much of the racism, sexism, and corruption of American society. Some of the most notable events of the 1960s involved young students practicing civil disobedience—i.e., refusing to comply with rules they considered unjust—in order to protest society's corruption. Students were instrumental in protesting the Vietnam War, fighting for civil rights for African Americans, and lobbying for gender equality. So it's not a coincidence that the novel ends with a group of young, free-thinking students refusing to obey their headmaster at the dawn of the 60s: Keating has inspired them to stand up for what they know to be right, and they'll perhaps continue to do so for years to come.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

The novel begins at Welton Academy, a Vermont private school. It is the beginning of the school year, and Welton's 300 students, all boys, walk into the great hall, many of them accompanied by their parents, as the headmaster, Gale Nolan, prepares to speak. Four of the boys carry banners into the hall, labeled "Tradition," "Honor," "Discipline," and "Excellence." Behind them, one elderly man carries a **candle**.

The novel begins with an image of conformity, formality, and tradition. The students of Welton Academy, we're informed, are about to begin their school year. The banners they're carrying hint at the importance of values and rules at Welton: by celebrating the four concepts listed here ("tradition, honor, discipline, and excellence), the students are submitting to Welton's "code" of right and wrong—essentially, Welton's definition of what a good human being is. The scene also has a religious tone, with Nolan playing the part of a priest presiding over his "congregation" of students. In a way, going to Welton is its own religion; a religion grounded in order, obedience, and academic rigor.

Once the students have taken their seats, Headmaster Nolan announces the beginning of the ceremony. It is 1959, Nolan proclaims—the 100th anniversary of Welton. As Nolan speaks, the elderly man walks across the room to where Welton's new students sit carrying unlit **candles**. He lights each candle with his own—this ritual, Nolan says, symbolizes the light of knowledge passing from old to young.

There's a lot to notice here. First, the year is 1959—in other words, the end of the 50s (an era of American history often considered to have been overly conformist and "square") and the beginning of the 60s (an era famous for its radicalism and energetic refusal of traditional values). So there's an irony in the fact that, at the dawn of this new era in American history, Welton isn't looking ahead to the future—in fact, it's turning back to celebrate the past (its own centennial). Furthermore, the students' candles are explicitly meant to symbolize knowledge being passed from elder to younger generations. But they also symbolize the students' lack of freedom—as far as Welton is concerned, they're just ignorant youths whose only job is passively accepting Welton's values and ideas, like an unlit candle "accepting" flame.

Nolan asks the students in the hall to name the four pillars of Welton. Most of the students immediately stand up and recite, "Tradition, Honor, Discipline, Excellence!" One student, the 16-year-old Todd Anderson, rises more slowly, and doesn't join in the recitation. Todd is one of the only students not wearing his school's blazer.

We immediately notice Todd's outsider status at Welton because he's not wearing the Welton jacket or chanting along. He's new to the school, meaning that he hasn't been fully indoctrinated in Welton's code of behavior and emphasis on conformity.

Nolan proceeds to list Welton's accomplishments—last year, more than three quarters of graduating students went on to the Ivy League. Two students, 16-year-olds Charlie Dalton and Knox Overstreet, smile at this information—they both exemplify the classic, "preppy" Ivy League image.

Welton offers its students a very clear bargain: students must study hard and obey all the rules, and in return, they'll be offered admission into an impressive Ivy League school, followed by (presumably) a good job. Many of the Welton students seem perfectly willingly to take this deal—Knox and Charlie, in this case.

Nolan calls on some of Welton's students to define the four pillars of success. He calls on Richard Cameron, the student carrying the "tradition" banner, to define tradition, and Cameron immediately shouts out, "the love of school, country, and family. Our tradition at Welton is to be the best!" Next, Nolan calls on George Hopkins, carrying the "honor" banner, to define honor—honor, Hopkins replies, is "dignity and fulfillment of duty." Nolan calls on Knox Overstreet, carrying the "discipline" banner, ands Knox explains that discipline is "respect for parents, teachers, and headmaster." Finally, Neil Perry, carrying "excellence," explains, monotonously, "excellence is the result of hard work."

In this passage, we begin to see the limitations of Welton's values. Duty, tradition, etc. are important, but only when practiced in moderation. Too much duty or tradition results in students who are overly passive and blindly obedient; it is important to learn to question authority, as well. The students at Welton seem either slavishly loyal to the four pillars—like Cameron, who immediately shouts out his answer—or deeply skeptical and even weary of them—like Neil, who answers monotonously.

Headmaster Nolan goes on to announce that an English teacher, Mr. Portius, has retired. His replacement, John Keating, will begin teaching English this year. Mr. Keating stands and nods—he's an "average-looking" man, in his early 30s. Neil's father looks at Mr. Keating suspiciously, since Mr. Keating is a new teacher.

John Keating is one of the key characters of the novel. Although he is average-looking, he's distinguished from most of his colleagues at Welton by his youth—as we'll see, most of the Welton teachers have been teaching there for decades. The fact that Neil's father, Mr. Perry, immediately distrusts Keating suggests that Mr. Perry respects routine and distrusts newness of any kind. Mr. Perry's distrust also foreshadows the novel's closing action, in which Perry helps to get Keating fired.

Finally, Nolan calls to the podium "Welton's oldest living graduate," Mr. Alexander Carmichael. Carmichael, a feeble-looking elderly man, makes a mumbling, incomprehensible speech, and afterwards, the students file out of the hall.

Carmichael's speech symbolizes the impotence and pointlessness of the Welton educational system. Welton prides itself on producing impressive, wise graduates—yet the only graduate of Welton we see here is dull and forgettable.

It is time for the students' parents to say goodbye to them. Charlie Dalton and Knox Overstreet's parents hug their children affectionately, while Neil Perry's father just stands stiffly by his son. Todd Anderson, whose parents aren't in attendance, stands alone until, unexpectedly, Nolan approaches him. Nolan tells Todd, "Your brother was one of our best." Nolan moves on to Neil Perry and tells him, "We're expecting great things of you."

Most of the students of Welton seem to come from severe, cold families—they're expected to be the best. Similarly, Todd, who's new at Welton, lives in his older brother's shadow, meaning that he's expected to live up to his brother's success. In general, then, the students of Welton are under a tremendous amount of pressure to succeed academically.

The younger students cry as they say goodbye to their parents, and many say they don't want to go to boarding school. Their parents snap at them and tell them not to be babies. The boys' parents leave, and the school year begins at Welton.

Life at Welton is cold and austere—from an early age, students are trained not to reveal their emotions, even if they're sad and lonely.

CHAPTER 2

The Welton junior class goes to the Honor Room to receive their extracurricular assignments. Two students, Steven Meeks and Pitts, whisper about the "new kid," Todd Anderson. A teacher, Dr. Hager, overhears them and gives them both demerits.

Two things to note here: first, the Welton students have a herd-like tendency to distinguish themselves from the "new kid"; second, the Welton teachers are always watching and judging their students.

The junior boys file into Headmaster Nolan's office, past Nolan's wife and secretary, Mrs. Nolan. Inside the office, Mr. Nolan greets a couple of the boys and asks about their families. He then explains to Todd that he'll be handing out extracurricular assignments. One by one, he gives the boys their extracurriculars. Nolan informs Todd that, based on his activities at his previous school, he'll be on Welton's soccer team. Todd, very nervous, tries to tell Nolan that he'd prefer rowing, but Nolan just says, "you'll like soccer here."

The fact that Mrs. Nolan is Mr. Nolan's secretary is a reminder of the sexism of the 1950s in American society: at the time, it would have been almost inconceivable for Mr. Nolan to be his wife's secretary, for example. Also, the scene underscores the overbearing, repressive nature of the Welton administration—instead of letting Todd choose his own activities, Nolan tells him what he will and won't like.

As the boys leave Nolan's office, Neil Perry greets Todd—they've been assigned to be roommates. Todd explains to Neil that his older brother, Jeffrey, went to Welton. Todd had tried to get in before, but went to a different school to get his grades up, then transferred in. Neil has heard of Todd's brother, saying, "so you're THAT Anderson."

Todd's name precedes him, and—like so many younger siblings of star students—Todd seems to resent the fact that his older brother is "famous" at Welton. Todd feels inferior to his brother, since his grades weren't good enough to go to Welton at first.

The boys enter their dormitory. Cameron tells Neil that Neil's roommate is a "stiff," without seeing that Todd Anderson is standing next to him. Neil assures Todd, "Cameron's a jerk."

Cameron immediately comes across as an unlikeable young man—he flatters his teachers and respects the rules (as we saw in Chapter 1), but disrespects his classmates.

Knox, Charlie, and Meeks greet Neil and Todd and ask Neil about taking chemistry at summer school. They agree that they'll be in the same study group that year, reluctantly including Cameron, who's a "brown-noser." Meeks and Knox introduce themselves to Todd, and immediately begin talking about Todd's brother, Welton's former valedictorian.

The passage conveys the friendship between Neil and some of the other Welton juniors. Because Welton is such a rigorous school, Neil and his friends define their friendship in academic terms—they're in the same study group. Other students recognize Todd's older brother—presumably causing Todd a lot of anxiety about living up to his brother's perceived success.

Suddenly, there's a knock on the door—Neil's father enters the room, and Neil becomes visibly nervous.

Neil seems like a confident, likeable young man—but like most of the other Welton students, he's terrified of his strict, overbearing father.

CHAPTER 3

Mr. Perry, Neil's father, has just entered Neil's room. The boys greet Mr. Perry politely. Mr. Perry tells Neil that he's signed up for too many extracurricular activities that year—he'll have to drop the school paper. Neil insists this isn't fair, and Mr. Perry motions for Neil to speak to him outside.

Much as Dean Nolan forced Todd to try soccer, an activity Todd doesn't particular enjoy, Mr. Perry forces Neil to change his extracurricular activities. Mr. Perry prioritizes Neil's academic success, even if it means forcing Neil to give up on some of his passions.

Outside, where they're alone, Mr. Perry angrily tells Neil never to contradict him in public again. Mr. Perry reminds Neil to listen to his parents until he's finished with medical school. Quietly, Neil agrees. Mr. Perry nods and leaves. Neil is furious with his father.

Mr. Perry is a highly strict parent—the fact that he gets angry with Neil just for politely disagreeing with him suggests that he's used to controlling Neil's life without question. Neil is too frightened of his father to contradict him again.

Back inside the dorms, Neil tells his friends that he won't be working on the paper, and they tease him for being so obedient to his father. Neil snaps back that none of his friends would dare contradict their parents, and they fall silent. Meeks mentions that they should study Latin later that night, and invites Todd to join them.

The Welton students (at least those we're introduced to) share a common bond—fear of their parents. The importance of academics at Welton is clear: the students are already studying hard, even before the first day of class.

Alone in their room, Neil and Todd talk about their fathers. Todd mutters that he'd take Neil's father over his own any day, but doesn't offer any explanation. Neil tells Todd that he'll need to speak up if he hopes to do well in school. Then, angrily, he jabs his achievement pin into his thumb, drawing blood, and throws it across the room.

Todd is shy about his family life, so that, for now, he doesn't open up to Neil. Neil is visibly frustrated with his father, and with his own inability to speak up to him. Neil's small but violent action—cutting his thumb—foreshadows his tragic suicide at the end of the novel; when Neil is frustrated with his father he takes it out on himself.

CHAPTER 4

It's the first day of class, and the junior boys wake up extra early. Todd admits to Neil that he's feeling nervous, and Neil assures Todd that he'll get through the day without a problem.

Neil is a kind, supportive roommate—unlike some of the other Welton boys, he offers encouragement and support for Todd, who's shy and nervous.

The school day proceeds, beginning with chemistry. The teacher sternly tells the junior students that they'll be assigned work every week. After chemistry the students head to Latin, where Mr. George McAllister immediately launches into a long list of nouns. The next class is trigonometry, in which the teacher, Dr. Hager, warns his students to do their homework or risk being penalized on their final grades. By the middle of the day, Todd is feeling overwhelmed—there's so much work to do. Steven Meeks assures Todd that he'll be fine.

The passage conveys the stressfulness of life at Welton: students are expected to work extremely hard and study for their difficult classes. But in the face of these academic challenges, many of the students help each other succeed, as evidenced by Meeks's support for Todd.

The next class is English. Mr. Keating walks into class without a jacket. Without wasting a moment, he jumps **onto his desk** and shouts, "O Captain! My Captain!" He explains that the phrase is from a poem by Walt Whitman—from now on, the students should call him either Mr. Keating or "O Captain! My Captain!" Mr. Keating admits that, years ago, he attended Welton. Then, abruptly, he walks out of the room, yelling for the students to gather their textbooks and follow him.

The contrast between Keating's approach to teaching and the other teachers' is clear: the other teachers focus on transferring as much information as possible; Keating tries to surprise and entertain his students. Keating asks that his students call him, "O! Captain! My captain!", suggesting that Keating is more than just a teacher for the students—as we'll see, he's a leader, a mentor, and a father-figure.

Confused, the students follow Mr. Keating to the Honor Room, where they had previously waited to see Headmaster Nolan. In the room, Mr. Keating asks Pitts to read a poem (written by Robert Herrick) from the textbook: "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time." The first sentence of the poem is, "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may." Mr. Keating explains that this line is meant to echo the idea of *Carpe Diem*, which means "seize the day" in Latin. Keating explains that the poem is trying to convince its readers to make their lives great before they die.

In this important section, Keating spells out his philosophy of life. Life is short, he explains, so people should "seize the day"—in other words, make the most of life while they still can. Unlike the other teachers at Welton, Keating uses his subject, literature, as a means of illustrating a profound, universal truth—in this case, the truth of following one's passion and "carpe diem."

Mr. Keating points his students to the walls of the Honor Room, which are lined with old photographs of Welton graduating classes. The students in the photographs, Keating observes, aren't so different from the students in the room today—but many of those former students have died before achieving their dreams. Even now, Keating insists, the former students in the photographs are whispering, "Carpe Diem." Abruptly, the bell rings. After class, Neil observes that the lesson was "different." Cameron worries that Mr. Keating is going to test them on what he talked about, but Charlie laughs at him and says, "don't you get anything?"

Keating ends his class with a profound point: most of the students in the old Welton class photographs are dead. By encouraging his students to look at old photographs, Keating is trying to make them think of their own lives, and see that they should make the most of life during their time on the earth. Hilariously, this profound point is utterly lost on Cameron, who's more interested in getting a good grade than in truly learning about life. In other words, he's an ideal Welton student.

CHAPTER 5

The next class of the day is gym. In gym, the gym master orders everyone to jog, and compliments Knox for his excellent pace. Most of the other students sweat and gasp through the class.

The passage portrays gym class as being difficult and rigorous—a metaphor, perhaps, for the way that the Welton administration as a whole ultimately forces its students to "run in circles"—i.e., chase goals that aren't necessarily worth pursuing in the first place.

At the end of the day, Knox mentions that he's having dinner with the Danburrys, a family his father knows well—and, as Cameron informs the rest, major Welton alumni donors. Neil sees Todd lost in thought, and invites Todd to his friends' study group that night. Todd declines, and Neil assures him that he can still join if he changes his mind. Later, Todd studies history and absent-mindedly writes, "Seize the day" in his notebook.

Cameron's obsession with status and advancement is clear: he already knows who the Danburrys are because he's very interested in becoming a successful Welton alumnus himself. Todd is interested in Keating's "carpe diem" philosophy, but he's still too shy to allow himself to express any kind of passion at all.

Later that evening, Knox gets a ride from Dr. Hager to the Danburry house. Knox rings the bell, and a beautiful young woman answers the door. She lets Knox into the house, where Mr. Danburry and Mrs. Danburry are waiting. They greet Knox, ask him about his father (apparently, a lawyer), and introduce Knox to their daughter, Virginia. Suddenly, the beautiful young woman walks back into the room with a young man. Mr. Danburry explains that the young man is his son, Chet Danburry, and the woman is his girlfriend, Chris Noel.

Knox is immediately smitten with Chris Noel, a beautiful young woman. Thus, a romantic conflict arises: Chris is dating another young man, Chet. The passage also gives a sense for Knox's family background—he comes from a wealthy family with a lot of "connections" to other powerful families.

While Chet bickers with his father about taking the car that night, Knox asks Chris where she goes to school. She goes to Ridgeway, where Chet is on the football team. Chris talks to Virginia, who mentions that she might try out for the production of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the nearby theater, Henley Hall. When Chet has succeeded in convincing his father to lend him the car, he leads Chris outside. Knox watches through the window as Chet and Chris make out in the car, and feels deeply envious.

Chet comes across as a spoiled young man who's used to getting what he wants. Knox becomes deeply jealous of Chet for getting to kiss Chris—his instant infatuation for Chris is plain. The passage also gives some information about Virginia and about the upcoming Shakespeare production, which will figure prominently in the novel's second half.

Later that night, Knox returns to his dorm and immediately announces, "I just met the most beautiful girl I have ever seen in my life." Meeks tries to get Knox to join the study group, but Knox can't concentrate on anything but Chris.

Knox obviously has a crush on Chris, but the novel never makes it clear if his infatuation with Chris—whom he barely knows—is "true love" or just an awkward teenager's crush.

The next day, Mr. Keating begins the English class by asking Neil to read the introduction to the textbook, "Understanding Poetry." The introduction argues, in dull, jargon-filled language, that poetry can only be understood if one first understands its "artfulness" and its "objectives." A great poem, the introduction insists, can be measured by graphing its formal artfulness with its objectives—a poem that covers a "massive area" would qualify as great.

The dryness and dullness of the "Understanding Poetry" essay conveys academia's inability to truly "feel" poetry. (The essay shares its title with a famous book of literary criticism by Cleanth Brooks that was widely criticized for being overly dry and technical). The point seems to be that, in analyzing poetry in such technical, almost mathematical ways, academics lose sight of the beauty and "music" of poetry—in other words, the very things that make poetry worth reading in the first place.

As Neil reads, Mr. Keating scrawls a graph of "artfulness vs. objectives" on the blackboard. When Neil falls silent, Keating screams and yells for every student in class to rip out the introduction. He marches the trashcan around the room, ensuring that every student rips out the pages. The students begin laughing and clapping—to the point where, suddenly, Mr. McAllister bursts in, furious with the noise. He's visibly surprised to see that Mr. Keating is in the room, teaching—he apologizes and leaves.

As in previous chapters, Keating uses performance and theatricality to make his point: the ordinary, "academic" approach to reading poetry is totally insufficient. The passage also provides an early example of how Keating's teaching methods begin to raise some eyebrows with his colleagues—by the end of the book, Keating's unconventional style will have alienated him from almost all of his peers at Welton.

Mr. Keating returns to his lesson. He insists that his students have to "triumph as individuals." Humans should read poetry in order to fill their lives with passion, excitement, love, and beauty—not because poetry has anything to do with "business school or medical school." Each student in his class, he says, quoting Walt Whitman, must "contribute a verse" to the "play" of life. "What will your verse be?" he asks his class. Then, Keating instructs the students to open their books and begin a discussion of William Wordsworth and Romanticism.

Keating makes his point: poetry should be "felt," not analyzed. He argues that although most school subjects at Welton are very practical (such as math or science), poetry shouldn't be measured in terms of its practicality—it should be celebrated for enriching the students' lives. Many writers and educators have criticized Keating's point of view for being anti-intellectual, however—it's possible to appreciate the beauty of poetry, they have argued, while also rigorously analyzing its meter, its literary devices, etc. Indeed, it's not clear how Keating would actually approach analyzing specific poems—and indeed, it's telling that the chapter ends just as he's about to begin doing so. Keating is more interesting when he's putting on a big, showy performance like the one in this chapter than he is when he's actually delving into literature.

CHAPTER 6

During lunch, Mr. McAllister joins Mr. Keating at the teacher's dining table. Keating cheerfully apologizes for "shocking" McAllister with his lesson that day. McAllister calmly replies that Keating's methods are fascinating but "misguided." Keating is trying to teach his students to be artists—and once they realize "they're not Rembrandts or Shakespeares or Mozarts, they'll hate you for it." Keating insists that he's trying to produce free thinkers, not artists. McAllister insists that he's just being realistic—people are happiest when they set aside "foolish dreams." Nevertheless, he admits, he looks forward to Keating's future lectures.

In this passage, the difference between Keating's approach to education and Welton Academy's (as embodied by Mr. McAllister) is clear. McAllister believes that education should be about transferring specific pieces of information to students; Keating maintains that education should be about teaching students to be free thinkers. McAllister dismisses Keating's talk of freedom and ambition as "foolish dreams," but based on what we've seen of Welton students' unhappy lives and families, going to a good college and getting a lucrative job could be dismissed as "foolish dreams," too.

At lunch, Neil shows his friends an old Welton "annual" (i.e., yearbook), in which there are pictures of Keating from his student days. He was accepted to Cambridge University, voted "most likely to do anything," and was also the head of the Dead Poets Society, a society none of the students have heard of before. Headmaster Nolan swings by the students and asks Neil how he's enjoying Mr. Keating. Neil replies that Mr. Keating is an excellent teacher, and Nolan nods in agreement, noting that Mr. Keating was a Rhodes Scholar.

Keating, we learn, has always been a free-spirited, outgoing man—hence his "most likely" at Welton. And yet Keating is also a brilliant man and a great thinker—that's why Nolan hired him in the first place. Nolan seems more concerned with Keating's impeccable resume than with his personality or specific teaching methods, so that, for now, Keating isn't under any pressure to conform to Welton teaching standards.

After classes, Neil and his friends see Mr. Keating leaving school. Neil, addressing his teacher as "O Captain! My Captain!" and asks about the Dead Poets Society. Mr. Keating, chuckling, explains that the Dead Poets would meet in the secret "old cave," read poetry by Whitman and other great writers, and savor the beauty of life. The society's name specified *dead* poets because, in order to be a member, one had to promise to be a member until death—therefore, even Mr. Keating is "still a lowly initiate."

Keating's description of the Dead Poets Society is important for a number of reasons. First, notice that Keating considers poetry a means of savoring life itself: as he sees it, poetry reveals beauty and strong emotions that might otherwise be repressed at Welton. Furthermore, it's important to see that Keating mentions death while describing the Dead Poets Society (just as he did when explaining the concept of "carpe diem"). While Keating's explanation could be interpreted as morbid (that's how Nolan will interpret it at the end of the novel), the point of invoking death is to savor life—which, as Keating explains, is itself a lifelong responsibility.

Later that evening, Neil suggests that everyone sneak out to the old cave—a traditional Welton meeting place. Cameron is reluctant to join, but eventually he, along with Pitts, Knox, Meeks, Charlie, agree to go there.

Of the Welton students, Neil is most eager to revive the Dead Poets Society—as we've already seen, he's been feeling rebellious for a long time, due to his father's overbearing behavior. The fact that the other Welton students agree to meet Neil in the cave suggests that they, too, secretly desire to escape their dull, repressed lives at Welton.

After dinner, Neil asks Todd to come to the Dead Poets meeting in the cave that night. He insists that Todd is being too standoffish—he needs to get to know his classmates, and let them get to know him. Todd politely declines Neil's invitation, saying he doesn't feel comfortable reading poetry in front of others. Neil insists that Todd has to come, and, if he's shy, he doesn't have to read any poetry. Neil then runs off before Todd can protest. Todd, miserable, returns to his history books.

Neil successfully cajoles Todd into joining the Dead Poets meeting, by just telling him he's going and then quickly running away before Todd can protest. It's interesting, in light of the novel's ideas about education, that Neil has to pressure Todd into joining the Dead Poets, especially considering that Todd will later become one of the Society's most enthusiastic members—it's suggested that Todd needs to "conform" to his more rebellious peers in order to unlock the passion and potential within himself.

CHAPTER 7

It's nearly lights out at Welton, and the junior boys are carefully planning how to sneak out that night. When Neil goes back to his room, he's surprised to see an old book on his desk—inside is the name "J. Keating, Dead Poets." He stays up, reading, until Dr. Hager comes by to turn the lights out.

Keating clearly approves of the Dead Poet Society revival, and leaves his old poetry collection for Neil to discover. Later on, the book will be a crucial piece of evidence, proving that Keating was "involved" in the Dead Poets, even though his role in the society itself is only peripheral.

Hours later, the boys wake up and sneak outside, waving flashlights. Carefully, they go out into the grounds surrounding Welton, until they come to the old cave. Inside, the boys manage to light a fire with candles. Neil calls to order a meeting of the Dead Poets, explaining that he and his friends—except for Todd, who will keep the minutes of the meetings—will read poems.

From the beginning, the Welton students treat the Dead Poets Society as a forbidden, illicit group—simply to hold a meeting, they have to break the rules. Neil quickly takes a leadership role in the Dead Poets, since, as we've already seen, he's especially hungry to defy authority, and particularly attracted to Keating's ideas.

To begin, Knox tells the boys that he wants success in wooing Chris. To help Knox, Charlie reads a bawdy poem by John Dryden, laughing with glee. Steven Meeks reads a poem by W. E. Henley that includes the line, "I thank whatever gods may be / For my unconquerable soul." Neil reads "Ulysses" by Alfred Lord Tennyson, which concludes, "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

The first poems the students read are indicative of the Dead Poets Society's guiding philosophy. The first, by Dryden, represents the boys' interest in love and sex. The second, "Invictus," by Henley, is a famous poem about passion, bravery, and integrity in the face of danger—symbolizing the boys' courage and will to defy the Welton administration. Finally, "Ulysses," by Tennyson, is one of the most famous expressions of the "carpe diem" ideal: in the poem, an elderly Ulysses ponders death and concludes that he and his followers should continue to fight and explore the world.

As the evening goes on, the boys become more relaxed and excited with their readings. As Pitts reads from the poetry of Vachel Lindsay, the boys become so energized that they start to dance. Afterwards, they leave the cave and go "back to reality," as Pitts puts it.

Vachel Lindsay was an early 20th century poet who used his poetry to experiment with African-American music and dance rhythms. (Some critics have faulted the novel for paying homage to Lindsay, noting that Lindsay was often accused of racially-charged condescension.)

The next day, Neil and his Dead Poet friends sit in Mr. Keating's class, exhausted from their activities. Mr. Keating tells the students, "language was invented for one reason: to woo women." He alludes to Walt Whitman once again, saying that humans must learn how to let their true natures speak. Suddenly, he jumps up **onto his desk**, saying, "We must constantly force ourselves to look at things differently." He invites the students to come to the front of the class, stand on the desk, and then jump down, and they all do so, one by one. Keating ends the class by telling the students to compose a poem for the next class. As the students prepare to walk out, he says, "And don't think I don't know this assignment scares you to death, Mr. Anderson."

Keating emphasizes the romantic qualities of poetry, appealing to the sexually frustrated boys—and also note his assumption that language and poetry must have been invented by men, if their purpose is to "woo women." Keating's choice to stand on his desk is a great example of his theatrical approach to teaching—by using comedy and physical performance, Keating is trying to rouse his students into enlightenment, helping them, quite literally, to see the world differently. As Keating's address to Todd suggests, Keating encourages both originality and bravery in his students—sometimes pressuring them to do things they don't want to do (much like Neil, pressuring Todd to attend a meeting of the Dead Poets).

After English class, the school day is over—today is a half-day. Pitts and Meeks go to work on their secret project—building a radio. Knox, meanwhile, bikes over to Ridgeway High School. When he arrives at school, he's surprised to see the students dancing around on a bus—the football team is preparing for a big game. Knox notices Chris and Chet, kissing. He bikes sadly away, wondering if he'll be able to come up with the words to woo Chris.

Knox remains enthralled with Chris, even though he barely knows her. Keating's talk of passion and "wooing women," however, raises the possibility that Knox will be able to win Chris's affections with words.

That afternoon, Todd sits in his dorm, trying to write a poem and tearing up sheet after sheet in frustration. Suddenly, Neil bursts in, waving a flyer advertising an upcoming production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Henley Hall. Neil explains that he's going to try acting—something he's always been passionate about, despite his father's strong discouragement. Yelling "Carpe diem!" he claims that he finally knows what he wants out of life.

Todd, we see, is a perfectionist—he can't write more than a few words of his poem without becoming frustrated. Neil, on the other hands, thinks that he's finally found his purpose in life—to be an actor. The fact that Neil, by his own admission, doesn't have much experience with acting at all, raises the question of whether Neil has truly found his passion, or only thinks he has. Certainly, the novel leaves open the possibility that Neil is just carried away with Keating's lessons, eager to defy his father's wishes.

Todd nervously asks Neil what his father would say if he found out that Neil was auditioning for a play—irritably, Neil replies, "Whose side are you on, anyway?" Neil accuses Todd of not understanding Mr. Keating's ideas. Todd tries to convince Neil to leave him alone, but Neil, still excited about acting, says, "No." Reluctantly, Todd agrees to attend the next Dead Poets meeting that afternoon. Neil himself won't attend, since he'll be auditioning for the play.

In this scene, Neil seems to take on Mr. Keating's persona for Todd—a funny, sometimes irritatingly energetic companion whose job is to push Todd to be more open and true to himself. Much like Keating himself, Neil is a natural leader.

CHAPTER 8

At the Dead Poets Society meeting that afternoon, Charlie, Knox, Meeks, Cameron, Todd, and Pitts go to the cave and read from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. Knox says that he feels as if he'll die if he can't get Chris to love him. The other members tell Knox that they feel as if they've never been alive at all—they've been sleepwalking through school, blindly obeying their parents' directions. Charlie admits that he's jealous of Knox's love for Chris—at least Knox knows what he wants out of life.

Even though Knox talks about "dying for love," the overall theme of this chapter is life, not death. The students feel that they're coming alive for the first time, thanks to Keating's energy and charisma. Encouraged to see the world with fresh eyes, they're coming to realize how irrational and unfulfilling their parents' expectations really are.

Charlie proposes that from now on, the cave should be a site for "experimentation"—everything that their parents and their teachers forbid them from doing in life. As the meeting ends, the Dead Poets return to their lives, ready to seize the day.

Out of all the Dead Poets, Charlie is arguably the most interested in rebellion—even rebellion for its own sake. He thinks that the Dead Poets should be trying new things in order to discover what they do and don't like—hence the vital importance of experimentation.

The boys return to Welton just in time for soccer practice—which, to their surprise, will be coached by Mr. Keating. Mr. Keating begins to call roll, but then tears up the attendance sheet and tells the students, "You don't have to be here if you don't want to." He leads the students to the soccer field, saying they can play if they want to play. On the soccer field, Keating passes out slips of paper with famous quotes written on them. One by one, the students are to shoot for the goal while reading their quote. The exercise continues until dark.

Knowing what we know about Keating's classes, it's no surprise that he runs his soccer practice so cavalierly. Keating is altogether against the idea of forcing students to act against their wills—therefore, he offers his students the freedom to do what they want during practice. (Keating's behavior contrasts markedly with that of the Welton gym coach, who forced the Welton juniors to run non-stop).

Back in his dorm, Todd tries to write his poem, and becomes so frustrated with himself that he breaks his pencil. Neil bursts in—he's gotten the part of Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The other boys cheer for Neil. Neil explains that he'll need to write a letter of permission to Headmaster Nolan—and in the letter, he'll need to impersonate his own father.

While Neil seems to be having immediate success with his own creative passion, it's possible—as we've already seen—that he's more interested in disobeying his father than in actually playing Puck; hence his plan to impersonate his father.

In his next class, Mr. Keating invites the students to present their poems. Knox reads a romantic poem about Chris, but is unable to finish it—he's too embarrassed. Keating praises Knox and notes that the greatest poetry makes its listeners feel "immortal."

Keating, who's already extolled poetry for its romantic possibilities, is highly supportive of Knox's poetry, and of his romantic aspirations.

It's Todd's turn to read his poem. Todd sadly admits that he hasn't written a poem—he couldn't bring himself to write anything. Keating nods and brings Todd to the front of the class. There, he instructs Todd to make the sound, "Yawp"—a reference, he explains, to Walt Whitman's proclamation, "I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world." Todd is highly reluctant to make the "Yawp" sound, but with Keating's encouragement, he does.

In this important scene, Keating tries to use surprise and even disorientation to help Todd be creative. Like the other Welton students, Todd is used to conforming with the rules—being reserved, polite, etc. Keating wants Todd to find his creativity by abandoning conformity, if only for a moment—and so he encourages Todd to "yawp."

Keating points Todd to the photograph of Walt Whitman that hangs over the door, urging Todd to think of the first thing to come into his mind. Todd immediately says the man looks like "a sweaty-toothed madman." Keating tells Todd to close his eyes and keep talking—with his help, Todd composes a poem about the "blanket that always leaves your feet cold," growing louder and more confident as he goes on. When Todd falls silent, Keating smiles and whispers, "Don't you forget this." Neil and the other students begin to clap for Todd—and "for the first time," Todd smiles confidently. As Todd sits down, Neil whispers, "See you at the cave this afternoon."

Here, Keating proves to Todd himself that Todd is a creative, talented poet after all. Keating uses unconventional teaching methods to take Todd out of his comfort zone for a moment, allowing him to compose poetry without fear of failure. Notice that Keating isn't giving Todd any specific information—in other words, he's not performing an educator's traditional duties. Instead, Keating helps Todd to harness his own innate talent; Keating himself is just the catalyst. The result of the exercise is immediately apparent: Todd gains new confidence in his own abilities, and—because he's finally aware of his talent—it's implied that he's becoming brave enough to open up to his peers.

That afternoon, Neil, Todd, and the other Dead Poets show up at the cave. Charlie has brought his saxophone, and plays a composition he calls, "Poetrusic." He plays very well—his parents made him take clarinet lessons, he explains. Suddenly, Knox bursts out, "If I don't have Chris, I'll kill myself!" He walks briskly out of the cave—and the other boys, worried, chase him back to campus. In the dorm, Knox uses the dorm phone to call Chris. She tells him, "I'm glad you called," and invites him to a party at Chet's house that weekend. She also tells him, "You can bring someone if you like."

Knox raises the notion of suicide for the first time in the novel—he's only being half-serious, but his words have some dark undertones, considering that the novel ends with an actual suicide. Also, Charlie notes that he's good at the saxophone because his parents gave him music lessons. It's important to keep in mind that, even as the Welton boys "rebel" against their parents and teachers, they demonstrate that they've been "raised right" (given music lessons, and all sorts of other luxuries for which they should be grateful).

Knox hangs up the phone triumphantly and tells his friends that he's going to Chris and Chet's party. Charlie is skeptical that Chris is interested in Knox at all, but Knox insists that he's overjoyed that Chris was "thinking of me." Neil mutters that he hopes Knox doesn't get hurt.

Because he's blinded by love (or lust), Knox interprets Chris's ambiguous greeting to mean that she is, in fact, romantically interested in him.

CHAPTER 9

Neil bikes to Henley Hall to rehearse *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He acts, opposite Virginia Danburry (who's playing Hermia), and the theater director compliments Neil on his confident, delightful performance. The rehearsal goes on for two hours—afterwards, Neil bikes back to Welton, proud of himself.

Neil seems like a natural actor, despite his relatively little theater experience. Much as Keating helped Todd harness his innate literary talent, Keating has inspired Neil to get in touch with his own innate theatrical talent.

When Neil gets back to school, he finds Todd, sitting by himself outside the gates, holding a box. Neil greets Todd, who explains that today is his birthday and his parents have given him a desk set (i.e., pens, ink, a ruler, etc.) as a gift—the exact gift they sent him last year. Todd's brother's birthday, Todd explains, is always much more important than Todd's—his parents favor Todd's brother constantly.

Todd's family expects a lot from him: because he's Jeffrey's younger brother, Todd is expected to be academically successful. But Todd's parents appear to be so emphatic about Todd's academics that they neglect to show Todd any love or warmth, even sending him the same dull birthday present two years in a row.

Todd remembers that when he was a kid, his father would call him "five ninety-eight"—the value of all the chemicals in the human body if they were added up and sold. Todd's father would tell him that he'd only ever be worth $5.98 unless he tried to improve himself. "No wonder Todd is so screwed up," Neil thinks. Todd concludes that his parents don't love him.

Todd's father's talk of money and chemicals epitomizes the shallow materialism of the adult world as it's depicted in the novel. Quite literally, Todd's father measures a person's worth in dollars and cents—even if the person in question is his own son. He seems to have no love at all for Todd, just a dispassionate awareness of his "worth."

The next day, in class, the students see that Mr. Keating has left them a note—meet in the courtyard. Outside, Keating warns that there is a "dangerous element of conformity" in his students' recent work. He urges his students to walk around the courtyard. As the exercise goes on, everyone begins walking in synchronized rhythms. Meanwhile, Headmaster Nolan and Mr. McAllister watch from their windows, amazed. The point of the exercise, Keating says, is that it's all-too easy to fall into conformity.

As in his earlier lessons, Keating uses physical exercises to enourage his students to see their environment differently. In doing so, Keating hopes to push his students to think differently as well. Interestingly, the exercise seems to imply that rebellion and disobedience can sometimes degenerate into new forms of conformity—a possibility that the novel raises later on.

Keating urges his students to remember the poet Robert Frost, who wrote, "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference." People should be original and brave in their thinking, he concludes.

Robert Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken," is often interpreted as a poem about the importance of being bold and true to oneself. But, as critics have pointed out, Frost's poem could also be interpreted as a parable about the dangers of rebelling for the sake of rebellion itself—going off the beaten path just because it's "hip." This interpretation of the poem—which neither Keating nor Kleinbaum seems to have in mind—is arguably very appropriate for the novel, since it describes how Keating's students begin to rebel against Welton simply because rebellion is fun, and not because of their passion or originality.

That night, the Dead Poets meet in the cave (though Knox is going to Chris's party). Charlie has brought two girls, Tina and Gloria, and carries a case of beer. Nobody has any idea where Charlie met the two girls, but they're clearly older, maybe even in their twenties, and Gloria is clearly attracted to Charlie. Charlie announces that from now on, he wants to be called "Nuwunda."

Charlie, the boldest of the Welton juniors, has brought beer and female guests to the meeting. Charlie could be considered the embodiment of Keating's celebration of freedom and originality, or a good example of how originality can devolve into disobedience for the sake of disobedience.

Meanwhile, Knox bikes to the Danburry house, and finds a wild party in progress. Chris greets him and asks if he brought anyone—she also hints that Virginia Danburry is around. Disappointed, Knox sits down and watches the couples making out.

Chris's greeting to Knox makes it fairly clear that she's not interesting in him, at least not romantically—indeed, she seems to want to set Knox up with Virginia.

Back in the cave, Neil, Cameron, and Charlie are outside, gathering logs for a fire. Charlie / Nuwunda explains that he's just trying to be spontaneous—the two girls are "townies" (i.e., not in school, living in the neighboring town). Cameron whispers that if anyone saw them with girls, they could all be expelled.

This chapter is a good example of the novel's cinematic quality (it's a novelization of a film, after all)—the chapter "cuts" back and forth between the party and the Dead Poets meeting. In this section, Cameron becomes increasingly uneasy with Charlie's volatile behavior, hinting at his future betrayal.

Back at the party, Knox walks around, dejected. Knox sees Virginia Danburry and they smile at each other, embarrassed. A jock offers Knox—whom he mistakes for one his friend's brothers—a bourbon, which Knox reluctantly drinks, coughing heavily. The jock walks away, and Knox, now a little intoxicated, turns to see Virginia, smiling.

In this comic scene, Knox gets drunk very quickly. It seems possible that Virginia is attracted to Knox, though Knox continues to feel infatuated with Chris and no one else.

Back by the cave, the boys, Gloria, and Tina sit around a fire. They drink whiskey, and each one of them tries to hide the fact that they find the drink disgusting. They talk about how Welton is an all-boys school, and Charlie announces that he's already penned an article, in the name of the Dead Poets, about how Welton should start accepting female students, so that the boys don't have to "beat off" as much. Neil is irritated with Charlie for behaving so recklessly and implicating the Dead Poets in his actions, but Charlie insists that there's no point to the Dead Poets Society unless the members take the lessons they've learned and apply them to their own lives.

Charlie brags about being in favor of admitting women to Welton, but his reasons for doing are highly shallow—he claims that there should be girls at Welton for the sexual gratification of the boys. Unfortunately, Charlie's rationale for admitting women fits with the way he's treating Gloria and Tina—he seems to think of them as passive, sexual objects, to be "experimented" with as he pleases.

Charlie recites poetry for Gloria—famous poets' work, which he passes off as his own. Gloria is extremely impressed.

Charlie's view of women (and poetry) comes across as particularly shallow here—he arguably "cons" the presumably-less-educated Gloria into kissing him by passing off some famous poetry as his own.

Back at the party, Knox, now drunk, thinks jealously of Chris and Chet. He clumsily staggers over a couple making out, and a voice shouts, "Watch where you're going!"

Knox is now highly intoxicated—losing any inhibitions that might keep him from "seizing the day."

CHAPTER 10

Picking up right where the last chapter ended, Knox is still at the party. He continues walking around the house, drinking bourbon. Now extremely drunk, Knox sits down on a couch, even though a couple is making out right next to him. Suddenly, he realizes that the couple is Chris and Chet.

Once again Knox is excluded from the romance he so desperately seeks.

Knox notices Chris's breasts, and, remembering Keating's command to "seize the day," shyly touches them. Because Chet and Chris are making out so intensely, Chris thinks that Chet is touching her breasts. Knox begins to rub Chris's breasts even harder, enjoying himself as he does—then, suddenly, he spills his bourbon, and Chris and Chet look up. Chet, furious with Knox, punches Knox in the face. Chris tearfully tells Chet to leave Knox alone, saying, "He didn't mean anything!" Chet pushes Knox out of the house and yells, "Next time I see you, you're dead!"

Morally speaking, this is perhaps the low-point of the novel. Knox is extremely drunk, and begins groping Chris, treating her body like it belongs to him. This behavior, while somewhat repugnant, could at least be partly understood in light of the fact that Knox is a drunk, sexually immature teenager. Yet the novel seems to mostly be playing the incident for laughs. Chris's defense of Knox is puzzling, considering that he just groped her breasts without her knowledge—she's a flat character, mostly just a "love interest" for Knox, and it seems that she's now falling for him despite his actions.

Back at the cave, the Dead Poets have continued drinking and reciting poetry. Charlie tells the Dead Poets to show Tina the "dead poets garden" so that he can be alone with Gloria. The Dead Poets, getting the message, leave Charlie alone. Alone, Gloria tells Charlie, "Every guy that I meet wants me for one thing … You're not like that." Charlie, surprised, asks, "I'm not?" Gloria asks Charlie to continue "composing" (but in fact, reciting) poetry—as he does, she moans, "This is better than sex."

Once again, the novel uses a male character's lecherousness and objectification of women as an opportunity for humor. Charlie, it's fairly clear by now, is strictly interested in Gloria as an object for his sexual gratification, though he's conning her into believing that he's attracted to her personality.

The next day at Welton, the students gather in the school chapel for an emergency meeting. Knox has a huge bruise on his face, and the other Dead Poets are exhausted and hung over. In the chapel, Nolan announces that there was a "profane article" in the school paper—he commands the "guilty persons" to come forward to avoid expulsion.

As the chapter comes to an end, it becomes clear that Keating's lessons are getting out of hand. Keating encourages his students to "seize the day" and be original thinkers. But the Dead Poets have interpreted Keating's lessons to mean that they have license to do what they want, grope whomever they want, seduce whomever they want, and disobey the rules for the sake of disobeying the rules. As the students' hangovers and injuries attest, their carelessness has consequences.

Suddenly, there's the sound of a phone. Everyone turns to see Charlie, carrying a ringing phone. With exaggerated seriousness, he answers the phone, then says, "Mr. Nolan, it's for you—it's God. He said we should have girls at Welton." Everyone laughs and cheers.

Charlie is a daring young man, though he seems to enjoy humiliating Nolan far more than he enjoys arguing for women's equality. In this way, he exemplifies one of the dangers of Keating's lessons—his students become enamored of rebellion for its own sake.

Nolan marches Charlie to his office, where he asks Charlie who else was involved in writing the editorial—but Charlie insists that he wrote it alone. Nolan nods, and orders Charlie to "assume the position." He then beats Charlie's buttocks with a paddle. After ten hits, Nolan tells Charlie, "If I find that there are others … they will be expelled, and you will remain enrolled." Nolan orders Charlie to apologize to the entire school.

This brief scene is a vivid reminder of the tyranny with which the Welton administration controls its students. On an ordinary day, it merely orders students to obey the rules; today, however, it uses physical force to force its students to obey. The scene is also important because it emphasizes the threat of expulsion, and shows Nolan's cruel and petty tactics when it comes to disciplining the boys.

Charlie returns to his dorm, where his friends are waiting for him. He explains everything Nolan told him, and continues to insist, "My name is *Nuwunda*."

Charlie clearly has no regrets for his actions: he continues to celebrate rebellion and disobedience, taking a new (made up) name for himself, and with it, a new, unrepressed identity.

Later that day, Nolan visits Mr. Keating in his classroom and asks him about how his classes have been going. Nolan insists that he's not blaming Mr. Keating for Charlie's actions, but also suggests that he's heard rumors of unorthodox activity in Mr. Keating's class. Mr. Keating replies that he's trying to teach his students to learn for themselves—an idea that Nolan dismisses contemptuously. Nolan leaves.

The tension is building quickly: previously, Nolan was satisfied with Keating because Keating had an excellent academic resume. But now, Nolan is starting to realize how impactful Keating has been on the Welton student body. The clash between Keating's approach to education (creating free thinkers) and Nolan's (passing on a lot of information) is crystal clear—unfortunately, Nolan, not Keating, has the power to ensure that his ideas about education win out.

Mr. McAllister then sticks his head into Mr. Keating's classroom—he's obviously overheard the argument. He tells Mr. Keating not to worry about the boys becoming conformists—"If you want to raise a confirmed atheist," he argues, "Give him a rigid religious upbringing. Works every time." Keating laughs.

Mr. McAllister's observation is interesting because of what it implies about the Dead Poets Society. Just as a religiously-indoctrinated child is more likely to embrace atheism in adulthood, one could argue that the students of Welton are predisposed to rebel against their parents and teachers because they've been repressed and bossed around for so many years. This would imply that the students' rebellious acts aren't much more "honest" or "true" than their previous years of dutiful studying—they're just an inevitable part of a youthful phase of rebelliousness. Naturally, Keating would disagree.

Later that night, Keating visits the boys in their dorm. He tells Charlie that his stunt was ridiculous and reminds him, "There is a place for daring and a place for caution." He convinces Charlie and his friends to obey the rules of Welton, reminding them that, if they're expelled, they wouldn't be able to take his classes.

For all his talk of originality and seizing the day, Keating is a moderate when it comes to civil disobedience. Perhaps inspired by McAllister's observation, he tries to impress upon Charlie that disobedience for its own sake is just as dangerous as obedience for its own sake. Keating doesn't want his students to be violent or aggressive; he wants them to stay in school and keep learning (and therefore, obey the rules when necessary).

The next day of class, Keating begins his class by talking about college—something that will "probably destroy" the students' love for poetry. In a college course, it's quite possible, the students will study great novels, only to be assigned a term paper on a horrible novel the professor himself as written. The students' best course of action, he argues, is to just go ahead and write the term paper. Keating then proceeds to teach his students how to write a paper about a book they've never read before. The key to writing such a paper, he explains, is to use pretentious diction and cite lots of obscure or nonexistent philosophers.

Responding to Nolan's urgings, Keating restructures his lessons. The lesson that Keating teaches in his chapter could be interpreted as a parody of the "college prep" classes Keating was supposed to be teaching all along. Keating prepares his students for college, but not in the usual prep school sense—he prepares them for the tedium of taking dull courses. As with his earlier lessons, Keating tries to teach his students how to be free and happy in life, rather than forcing them memorize a lot of specific information. Here, though, his point is that, at times, his students will have to sacrifice some of their freedom and happiness for a "greater good" like graduating from college.

Keating proceeds to talk about how to take exams in college. College, he explains, is full of "delectable beasts" called women. He hands out blue books (the classic exam booklets still used for many college tests) and gives his students a pop quiz—but while administering the pop quiz, he uses the projector to project pictures of beautiful women onto the wall. The boys can't concentrate on their blue books. As Knox proceeds with his pop quiz, he just writes, "Chris" again and again.

Keating seems to share some of his students' propensities for objectifying women, or else is just trying to speak to them in their "language." As far as he's concerned in this lesson, women are interesting and important to students insofar as they're a distraction from men studying.

CHAPTER 11

It's winter at Welton, and Todd and Neil are busy going through lines from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in preparation for Neil's upcoming performances. Neil is so taken with his lines that he tells Todd that he loves everything about acting—it's the most wonderful thing he knows. Actors, he realizes, can live hundreds of "different lives" by playing different characters. He also mentions that "the girl who plays Hermia" is an excellent performer.

It's telling that Neil celebrates acting because it allows him to "live many lives"—inspired by Keating, Neil wants to live life to the fullest, and sees acting as the best, and perhaps most literal, way to do so. Even if he started out mostly wanting to rebel against his father, at this point Neil is acting out of a genuine passion for theater.

Todd and Neil walk back to their dorm—and inside, Neil is shocked to find his father, waiting for him. Without even greeting his son, Mr. Perry shouts, "Neil, you are going to quit this ridiculous play immediately." He demands to know if "that Mr. Keating" put him up to performing. Neil tries to protest—he's gotten excellent grades, and was going to surprise his father with news of the play. Mr. Perry shakes his head—Neil is to quit his play tomorrow. Neil protests that the play opens tomorrow—he couldn't possibly quit. Mr. Perry bellows that Neil must quit.

Mr. Perry is at his most tyrannical in this scene. Despite the fact that Neil has still been getting good grades, Mr. Perry insists that Neil give up his play. Mr. Perry simply doesn't like being contradicted—he's so overbearing and stubborn that he can't stand his son disobeying him, or contradicting the plan he has already laid out for Neil's life.

Later in the day, Dr. Hager notices Meeks, Knox, and Todd eating their food oddly—on closer inspection, he sees that the boys are eating with their left hands. Knox coolly tells Dr. Hager that old habits "perpetuate mechanical living." Furious, Dr. Hager orders the students to eat with their correct hands. The boys oblige, but switch back as soon as Dr. Hager is out of sight.

Much as Keating encouraged his students to stand on their desk and see the world differently, Knox and his friends here eat with their left hands to "jolt" themselves into seeing the world with fresh eyes. Yet their actions are arguably a good example of how the students have begun to fetishize difference—they've become as blindly devoted to originality as they were to conformity. Put another way, not conforming to the rules of Welton has become its own form of conformity.

Neil joins his friends in the dining hall and explains that his father is forcing him to quit the play. Charlie suggests that Neil talk to Mr. Keating about the matter. Charlie, followed reluctantly by Neil and the other Dead Poets, walks over to the Welton teacher's quarters and finds Mr. Keating's room. When Charlie finds that the door is unlocked, he enters, curious about how Mr. Keating spends his spare time. The other students follow him, nervous.

In this scene, the Dead Poets' fascination with Keating is plain. The Dead Poets, especially Neil, think of Keating as a mentor, a guide, and even a father-figure—when Neil has a personal crisis, he turns to Keating.

Inside Mr. Keating's room, the students find a framed picture of a beautiful woman in her late twenties. Next to the picture there's a half-written letter, addressed to "Jessica." The letter describes how "I" (presumably Mr. Keating) can't stand being away from Jessica. Suddenly, there's a sound, and Mr. Keating enters the room. Sheepishly, Neil tells Mr. Keating he needs to talk to him alone. The other students leave the room, and Mr. Keating teases them, "Drop by any time."

In this scene (which didn't appear in the film), we learn a little about Keating's personal life. He's apparently having a love affair (or is at least in love) with a woman named Jessica: a Shakespearean name, appropriate for an English teacher. Keating was apparently speaking from personal experience when he said that the purpose of poetry is to "woo women."

Once Neil and Mr. Keating are alone, Neil explains that his father is making him quit the play. Neil can understand his father's interest in making sure he (Neil) does well in school—they're not a rich family, and a good education at Welton means far more to Neil than it does to Charlie, whose family is already wealthy. But he still wants to act. Mr. Keating urges Neil to talk to his father before the performance and prove his passion and commitment. "Stay true to yourself" is his advice.

Keating's advice to Neil is, "stay true to yourself." Keating doesn't like the idea of Neil lying to his father, because doing so would both deceptive and self-deceptive (Neil would be tricking himself into temporarily forgetting about his father instead of trying to make things better in the long term). The passage is very important because it establishes that Keating wants Neil to be open and honest with Mr. Perry. As we'll see, Neil's tragic decision not to take Keating's advice leads to his suicide.

Meanwhile, the other Dead Poets are at the old cave. Knox sits writing a love poem for Chris, while Todd writes a poem of his own. The Poets suggest that Knox deliver his poem to Chris—they've already seen, via Charlie and Gloria, how words can inspire romance.

Here as before, the Poets think of poetry as a means to an end—in this case, convincing women to love them.

The next day, Knox bikes to Chris's high school. He finds Chris walking to class, and explains that he's come to apologize to her for the other night—"I acted like a jerk," he says. He explains that he loves her, and that she deserves better than Chet. Chris continues walking to class, not sure what to say. Knox walks into class with her and begins to read the poem he wrote to her. Chris blushes with embarrassment, and his classmates giggle. Knox concludes, "I love you," and walks out.

Knox tries to woo Chris using poetry, growing ever more bold. Still, Knox is at least acting more mature than he was at the party—also note that Chris continues to be untroubled by Knox's past actions, and indeed seems to be interested in him.

CHAPTER 12

Knox returns to Welton. Mr. Keating's class has just ended. Keating calls Neil aside and asks him how his talk with his father went. Neil lies and says that his father is going to allow him to perform—Neil will be allowed to act, as long as he keeps his grades up. Neil, who hasn't spoken to Mr. Perry at all, walks away from Mr. Keating, embarrassed by his lie.

Neil lies about his conversation with his father (a conversation which actually never happened). Neil's fear of his father seemingly outweighs his love for the theater—just as Keating said, Neil isn't yet being "true to himself."

Knox rejoins his classmates and tells them about reading his poem. He admits he has no idea what Chris thinks about the poem, or about him.

Knox is still infatuated with Chris, but he's being more realistic about the consequences of his actions—instead of blindly assuming that Chris shares his feelings, he admits that he doesn't know what Chris is thinking.

It's the night of the opening of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the Dead Poets are preparing to leave for Henley Hall. As the students join Mr. Keating, who's attending the play as well, Knox notices Chris walking through the dorm. Knox is appalled that Chris has come all the way to Welton—he protests that she could get him in big trouble if any other teachers see her. Chris shoots back that Knox is being a hypocrite—he visited her at her high school, after all. She explains that Chet found about Knox's actions, and is threatening to hurt him. She came to warn him. Knox asks Chris for "one chance"—if Chris goes to the play with him tonight, and doesn't enjoy herself, he'll leave her alone forever, "Dead Poet's honor." Chris reluctantly agrees.

Perhaps it's telling that Chris would come all the way to Welton to give Knox a message Chet has already given him—she might be more attracted to him than she let on. Once again, Chris as the "love interest" is portrayed as being helplessly drawn to the boy who groped her at a party.

The play is beginning, with Keating, Chris, Knox, and the other Dead Poets in attendance. Neil immediately gets the audience's attention as Puck—he's an excellent actor. As the play goes on, Charlie notices Virginia Danburry, playing Hermia—"She's beautiful," he sighs. Meanwhile, Chris finds "herself becoming infatuated with Knox" as they sit and enjoy Shakespeare together. As the play ends, Chris and Knox are holding hands.

Two people fall in "love" in this scene: Charlie falls for Virginia (who's been a minor character up until now), and Chris falls for Knox. However, Chris's newfound infatuation with Knox seems even more ridiculous than Knox's initial infatuation with Chris: Chris barely knows Knox, and what little she does know about him isn't very flattering.

After the play, the Dead Poets go to the dressing room to congratulate Neil. Charlie, however, finds Virginia, still standing on the stage. He tells her, "Bright light shines in your eyes," immediately getting her attention.

Although the novel portrays Charlie as being more sincere about his feelings for Virginia, Charlie uses the same tricks to encourage Virginia to love him—passing off other people's poetry as his own. Thus, it's unclear if Charlie's feelings for Virginia are very different from his feelings for Gloria or Tina—his methods of wooing are identical.

Back in the dressing room, the theater director alerts Neil—Mr. Perry is in the theater, and he looks furious. In the lobby, Neil finds Mr. Perry and Mr. Keating. When Keating praises Neil's performance, Mr. Perry orders him, "Keep away from him!" He drags Neil out of the building. Mr. Keating stares after Neil, deeply sympathetic, while the other Dead Poets, along with Chris and Virginia, prepare to walk outside.

Mr. Perry is furious with Neil for disobeying him. It's worth remembering that, had Neil followed Mr. Keating's advice and communicated with his father, there's at least a chance that Mr. Perry would have been more understanding.

CHAPTER 13

Neil, his mother, and his father are gathered in their home. Mr. Perry tells Neil that he's withdrawing Neil from Welton—from now on, Neil will go to Braden Military School. Neil is going to Harvard, Mr. Perry declares, and he's going to be a doctor. Neil tries to protest, but Mr. Perry screams, "You have opportunities I never dreamed of! I won't let you squander them."

In part, Mr. Perry's behavior is understandable—he sincerely wants his son to have a good life, a good job, and a good education: things he himself never had. But Mr. Perry is so overbearing and tyrannical in his desire for his son's "success" that he refuses to listen to his son's actual desires and feelings.

Back at Welton, the Dead Poets, Virginia, and Chris go to the cave, though they notice that Cameron has left at some point. As they sit down, Mr. Keating appears. The boys ask Mr. Keating to lead the meeting. At first he protests, but eventually he gives in and begins to read from the Dead Poets Society poetry anthology. After Mr. Keating falls silent, Todd volunteers to read something he wrote. The poem begins, "We are dreaming of tomorrow, and tomorrow isn't coming; we are dreaming of a glory that we don't really want." Everyone applauds when Todd is finished reading. Keating says, "I see great things for Todd Anderson." He then begins to read a strange, chant-like poem by Vachel Lindsay, and he walks back to Welton, with his students behind him, chanting poetry.

In this scene, Keating finally joins the Dead Poets in a reading. While the scene is joyous, Keating's association with the Dead Poets will eventually contribute to his dismissal from Welton (notice that Cameron isn't present at the meeting, suggesting that he's already begun to distance himself from the Dead Poets' radical behavior). Todd's poem reflects the experience of almost every Welton student: Todd and his peers are expected to achieve academic "glory" at Welton, but they're unsure if they really desire this glory in the first place.

Neil sits alone in his room: he feels himself to be "a brittle empty shell."

Neil is in the midst of a crisis: thanks to his father, he thinks that he'll never be able to act again. And for Neil (at this moment of teenage passion, at least), acting is as precious as life itself—therefore, giving up acting is like giving up life.

CHAPTER 14

Late at night, Mr. Keating walks from the cave back to Welton, followed by his students, Virginia, and Chris—all of them chanting poetry.

In this scene, Keating isn't the students' leader—he's just another one of the Dead Poets.

Back in the Perry house, Neil finds a key and opens the drawer of a desk. He puts on his Puck costume, placing the **crown of flowers** on his head.

The imagery in this scene evokes that of the Biblical passion of the Christ—Neil's crown of flowers suggests the crown of thorns, symbolizing the way Neil will sacrifice his life for a love of art.

Back at Welton, Keating and his Dead Poets run through the forest, chanting joyously. Knox and Chris kiss.

Chris finally reciprocates Knox's feelings, but because she's such an underdeveloped character, her newfound love is somewhat implausible.

Back in the Perry house, Mr. Perry wakes up—he's heard a loud noise. He runs into Neil's room to find Neil, clutching his father's revolver, covered in blood.

It's telling that the gun that kills Neil belongs to Neil's father. With his strictness and cruelty, Mr. Perry has seemingly driven his already passionate, sometimes self-destructive son to suicide.

Keating and his students return to Welton very late. Early the next morning, Charlie wakes Todd up in his bed. Neil is dead, Charlie explains, stone-faced: he shot himself. Todd is so shaken he runs to the bathroom and vomits. Todd shouts that Mr. Perry killed Neil—Neil would never give up on life. Knox is doubtful, but Todd insists he's right—even if Mr. Perry didn't pull the trigger, he "killed" his son.

When Todd hears the news about Neil's suicide, his immediate reaction is to blame Mr. Perry. Todd is correct to say that Mr. Perry's cruelty and harshness drove Neil to depression, even if it's overly simplistic to say that Mr. Perry "killed" his son. Nevertheless, Todd's instinctive scapegoating foreshadows the way Welton Academy will try to find a different scapegoat for Neil's death.

Meanwhile, Mr. Keating sits in his classroom—he's heard the news, too. He picks up his poetry anthology, which he took home from the Dead Poets meeting. He looks at the words, "Dead Poets," written on the first page, and begins to weep.

Mr. Keating weeps because the phrase "Dead Poet" has taken on a tragic new meaning. Keating's philosophy of "seize the day" was based on the inevitability of death—now, death has come to one of the Dead Poets. Furthermore, Keating might be weeping because he feels he played a role in Neil's death—he inspired Neil to act in the play, accidentally increasing the friction between Neil and his father.

Neil is buried in Welton town, and the Dead Poets carry his coffin at the funeral. The teachers of Welton attend the funeral, Keating included. Later, at the Welton chapel, Headmaster Nolan makes a speech for the boys, in which he says Neil was "a fine student, one of Welton's best." He also says that, at the Perrys' request, there will be an investigation into "the matter."

In the aftermath of Neil's suicide, the moral bankruptcy of Welton Academy is made clear. Nolan can only offer a few clichéd words about Neil's death (presumably the same words he would have used about any other Welton student), and, selfishly, he relates Neil's death back to Welton. The rest of the book will concern the investigation into Neil's death.

Later that day, back in their dormitory, Meeks tells the Dead Poets that Cameron is talking to Headmaster Nolan right now—explaining everything about the Dead Poets Society. Charlie nods, realizing what's going on—Welton needs a scapegoat for the accident. "Schools go under because of things like this," he says.

Ultimately, Nolan and the Welton administration aren't concerned with right and wrong—they're concerned with keeping their profitable school in business. For all the talk of honor and morality at Welton, the people in power at there are actually greedy and amoral, willing to blame an innocent man for murder.

Suddenly, Cameron enters the dorm. Charlie accuses Cameron of "finking," but Cameron denies it—he claims he just told the truth. Charlie is so furious that he tries to hit Cameron. Knox warns Charlie that if he hits Cameron, he'll be expelled, to which Charlie replies, "I'm out anyway." Cameron agrees, and explains that, since Mr. Keating roused the boys' interest in the Dead Poets Society, he'll be blamed for the tragedy and fired from Welton. If it weren't for Keating, he claims, Neil would still be alive, dreaming of being a doctor. Todd angrily tells Cameron that he's wrong—Keating didn't tell Neil to do anything. "I say let Keating fry," Cameron says. "Why ruin our lives?"

Cameron has always been reluctant about the Dead Poets, and uneasy around Keating. He explains that Keating will be scapegoated for Neil's death. While it's certainly true that Keating inspired Neil's passion for theater—a passion that contributed to his suicide—it's untrue to say that Keating is to blame for Neil's death. Keating encouraged Neil to speak to his father honestly about his passion for acting—had Neil done so, Mr. Perry might have let him continue performing, or at least have opened up a channel of communication less extreme than suicide. Furthermore, Keating tried to teach his students to embrace the beauty of life, not give in to death. Tragically, Neil has seemingly misinterpreted "carpe diem" to justify his own self-harm.

Charlie runs at Cameron and punches him in the face. Cameron staggers back, but begins to laugh—"You just signed your expulsion papers," he says. The students walk out of the room, except for Cameron, who yells, "You can't save Keating, but you can save yourselves!"

Ultimately, Cameron has betrayed the Dead Poets by ratting out Keating and, more implicitly, by accepting Welton's model of success; first and foremost, he wants to remain in school, even if it means compromising his loyalty to his peers and teacher. His parting words establish the moral crisis of the final chapter: the Welton students can either betray their beloved teacher or remain loyal to him, and suffer the real-world consequences.

CHAPTER 15

A few days after the events of the last chapter, the investigation into Neil's death is almost complete. One by one, Dr. Hager marches the students into Headmaster Nolan's office. Meeks comes back from his meeting with Nolan, crying. Outside Nolan's office, he explains to Todd that Charlie has been expelled. Todd asks what Meeks told Nolan, and Meeks replies, "Nothing they didn't already know."

In the end, almost all the students agree to blame Keating for Neil's death. While the Welton students adore Keating, they value their places at Welton more highly. This would suggest that Keating hasn't really taught all his students to break free from conformity—or else the rather pessimistic outlook that conformity always wins in the end.

A few minutes later, Dr. Hager comes outside to bring Todd in to meet with Nolan. Inside the office, Todd finds Nolan waiting with Todd's own parents. Nolan asks Todd, "You do admit to being a part of this Dead Poets Society?" Reluctantly, Todd says, "Yes." Nolan presents Todd with a long piece of paper, describing how Mr. Keating inspired Todd and the other members of the Dead Poets Society to engage in "reckless, self-indulgent behavior" and encouraged Neil to disobey his father, resulting in Neil's death. Nolan explains that, thanks to the students signing the contract, Keating will never teach again.

Headmaster Nolan seems to know that Keating isn't really morally responsible for Neil's suicide—to blame anyone for that tragedy would be repugnant. Nevertheless, Nolan knows that he has to fire somebody in order to keep his wealthy donors pleased, so he chooses to fire Keating, the nonconformist. While Keating's students were reckless at times, it's simply untrue to say that he inspired them to be self-indulgent—on the contrary, Keating encouraged his students to pursue their passions and remain true to themselves.

Todd hesitates. His parents shout at him to sign the contract. But Todd refuses. Keating loves teaching, Todd insists—Todd won't destroy Keating's life. Nolan turns away, telling Todd's parents, "Let him suffer the consequences." Nolan warns Todd that if he doesn't sign, Keating will *still* be fired, and Todd will be placed on strict probation for the rest of the year. Todd walks out of the room without saying anything. Alone with Nolan, Mr. Anderson and Mrs. Anderson apologize to Nolan on behalf of their "stubborn" son. Nolan replies, "Nonsense. Boys his age are highly impressionable. We'll bring him around."

Todd faces the same moral challenge as the other Welton students: he can either fall in line and go along with Nolan, or he can stand up for the truth: Keating is not to blame for Neil's suicide. It would be easy for Todd to rationalize going along with his Welton peers and signing the contract, particularly since Keating will be fired either way. But instead, Todd stands up for what he knows to be right—he refuses to sign. His bravery and self-reliance prove that Keating has made a lasting impact at Welton after all: he's inspired at least one student to be true to himself. (The passage marks a notable difference between the book and the film version—in the film, Todd signs the document.)

The next day, Mr. McAllister walks his Latin students across the campus, making them recite Latin verbs. He glimpses Keating, watching from a window, but then turns away and resumes walking.

The other Welton teachers seem to disagree with Keating for his "radical" methods. The fact that McAllister continues with his old Latin drills might suggest that Keating has done little to change the educational system at Welton—none of the other teachers will follow his example.

Keating sits in his office, packing up his books of poetry. He walks into his old classroom to retrieve the last of his things, only to realize that his students are in the middle of class. The Dead Poets turn nervously and see their former teacher. Headmaster Nolan is teaching the English class.

The symbolism of this image is clear: Keating and his method of teaching students to think for themselves have been kicked out of Welton—in his place, Headmaster Nolan teaches the class, using dull, old-fashioned methods designed to foster blind obedience.

Nolan nods curtly to Keating, then asks his students what authors they've been studying all year. Cameron eagerly reports that they've done the Romantics—but not, Nolan points out, the realists. Nolan instructs the students to read the introductory essay by Dr. Pritchard (the essay Keating told his students to rip out). Cameron tries to explain that the essay has been ripped out. Nolan, angry, gives Cameron his own copy of the textbook and orders him, "Read!"

Notice that Nolan expected junior students to study the realists (a literary school) rather than the Romantics, perhaps suggesting that Nolan wants practicality rather than passion in his students. The passage is somewhat comic because it alludes to the earlier chapter in which Keating urged his students to rip out the introduction to the textbook—despite Nolan's best efforts, Keating has made a small but lasting contribution to education at Welton; the textbook is a little lighter.

Keating packs up his things, listening to Cameron read the essay. Suddenly, Todd jumps up and says, "They made everybody sign it!" As Nolan shouts for Todd to sit down, Keating replies, "I believe you, Todd." Nolan orders Keating to get out of the class immediately. Tearfully, Todd stands **on his desk** and calls, "O Captain! My Captain!" As Nolan shouts for Todd to step down, most of the other Dead Poets, including Meeks, Knox, and Pitts (but not Cameron), stand on their own desks.

By standing on his desk and addressing Keating as "O! Captain! My Captain!", Todd demonstrates that Keating has taught him to be a nonconformist and think for himself. Instead of obeying Nolan, the other Dead Poets stand up with Todd, proving that Keating's impact on his students has been immense: in less than a year, he's passed along some of his enthusiasm and passion, training his students to love him, but also to be free thinkers on their own.

Keating stares back at his students, overcome with emotion. "Thank you, boys," he says. He nods, and walks out of the room.

Keating is visibly touched by the boys' show of solidarity: the students have proven that Keating made their lives extraordinary after all. Keating will never teach another class, but at least he can take pride in the fact that he changed the Dead Poets' lives.

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