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## Dead Poets Society: Masterpiece?

Roger Pattimore

As a university instructor at several universities in the Tokyo area, something quite extraordinary has happened over the last four years. In the 2011 school year, for the first time, I showed Peter Weir's film *Dead Poets Society* (Disney 1989) as part of three English language courses. I had seen the film at least two times before my decision to use it in class. My main reasons for choosing it were not mainly associated with any particular quality of the film, although I had liked it very much. Rather, as a teacher, the absence of sex, violence, and foul language were key factors, and, to a lesser extent, the film is centered on roughly the same age group as most of my students. I had also heard from other instructors that it worked well as a focus for class discussion. I showed short sections of the film in each of several classes, and students were asked to discuss some of the ideas in groups after each section.

This is what surprised me. The film takes place in Vermont, a small state in the northeastern United States, and is set in 1959. I thought the students not only enjoyed the film, but liked it well beyond my expectations, and nearly all were motivated to talk about and express opinions about it. Since my first experiment in 2011, I have watched it at least twenty more times with different groups of students. Every time I have showed it, the students have watched with rapt attention. At the beginning of the film they laughed, and at the end many openly wept for Neil, and then wept at the triumph of Todd. Increasingly, I began to wonder what it is about this film that so moves students. Distant in both time and place, and never a slick Hollywood blockbuster, what could it possibly have to say to young Japanese students in 2015? I really had no answer

for this, and, whenever one has no answer for success of any creation, it is necessary to look beyond the conventional. Also, I found that every time I watched the film, I noticed something new or something I had not considered. Was it something about the film that transcends convention, time and place? What started as a simple pedagogical observation, the film works well as classroom tool, became an inquiry into the nature of this film and its relationship to art.

In considering the title of this essay, I debated with myself and others what word or words to use. I used 'art' above, but the word 'art' has quite a broad sense. It is too general and not precisely what I mean in the phrase '... its relationship to art'. I think it is fair to say that many things are art, but few are great. Even 'great art' does not quite fill the bill. 'Masterpiece', while far from perfect as the correct word, eliminates much confusion, and that is the word that I shall use henceforward.

What is a masterpiece, then? To answer this question we must first more clearly distinguish art from a masterpiece. Art could be defined as an expression of human creativity and imagination. Painting, sculpture, music and writing are forms 'art'. Almost anyone can create art under that definition in any of those categories, even a small child. The word 'masterpiece' has two specific meanings. It may have the literal and probably original meaning of being the defining work of an artist (a master's piece). Or it could have the broader meaning of something that is at the peak of its class. Much of the discussion hereafter leans toward the second meaning although both apply.

Following from this definition, then, another question for me was where does cinema fit into the art world? I think it is safe to say that even the best films still exist at the edges of what is considered great art. The main reason is that, relative to other art forms such as sculpture, theater, painting, music, and writing, all of which date from the very distant past, it is a new entrant. It has only been made possible by rapid and sudden technological changes in the last 125 years. The first real film was produced in 1888. However, it took much longer for film to emerge as any

kind of art form. As a point of reference, let us say that one of the very early feature length films of note was “Les Miserables” released in 1909, a U. S. version of Victor Hugo’s classic novel.

Moreover, if we are going to include a film as a genuine masterpiece, must it be wholly an original work? It is certainly true that almost every major play and novel has been reprised in a film of some sort. A striking example that illustrates this contradiction is Franco Zeffirelli’s 1968 version of *Romeo and Juliet*. In my mind, this is the alpha and omega version of Shakespeare’s play. Zeffirelli not only stayed close to the original language and rhythm of the play (although some liberties were taken), but he also created breathtaking and painstakingly detailed sets, chose great locations, as well as perfectly cast Olivia de Hussey and Leonard Whiting as the ‘star-crossed lovers’. Personally, while I’d be interested in seeing George Cukor’s 1936 version, any version after Zeffirelli’s would seem utterly superfluous to me including Baz Luhrmann’s somewhat critically acclaimed variation released in 1996. A newer version has been released in the UK directed by Carlo Carlei. I find it difficult to believe that this new version would be better in any way than Zeffirelli’s. However, I will reserve judgment until I see it. Nonetheless, despite all the cinematic excellence of Zeffirelli’s adaptation, it is still Shakespeare. The best that can be said is that Zeffirelli’s effort is a cinematic masterpiece, but not necessarily his masterpiece. That distinction must remain with The Bard. Therein is one plus point for *Dead Poets Society*. Besides its considerable cinematic excellence, it is also an original creation of Tom Shulman and Peter Weir. However, let us leave that distinction aside for the moment.

Up to this point, I have stated that art is a general term which does not necessarily imply excellence. In other words, while art is an attempt to create something pleasing or memorable, only a relative few works become a ‘masterpiece’. What is it, then, that distinguishes a masterpiece from other kinds of art? Many will say this is difficult to answer, and some might say it is impossible. Others say we do not know how to define a masterpiece, but we know one when we are witness to it. While many

have debated this issue, I think there are three interwoven features of a masterpiece that most people can agree on. First, and most basic, is that a masterpiece must be skillfully made. This would range from the merely technical aspects, to the deeper structure of the work. Second, a masterpiece reflects. It doesn't tell. It doesn't lecture or explain. It shows. It asks questions, but does not necessarily answer them. It provokes thought. Third, and most important, a masterpiece endures through time. It is not momentary. Rather it must continue to entertain and intrigue through several generations. Thus, let us examine *Dead Poets Society* under these criteria.

First, is *Dead Poets Society* skillfully made? From the point of view of the critics, Peter Weir, (the director) already had had several critical successes prior to this film. Of special note were *Gallipoli* (1981), *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982), and *Witness* (1985). These are fine films, but none, in my opinion, qualify as masterpieces under the above definition. Later works such as *The Truman Show* (1998), and *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* (2003) deserve honorable mention, but, again, neither of these, while certainly among Weir's best, is a masterpiece. In my view Peter Weir's best film is still *Dead Poets Society*, so it is at least a masterpiece in the sense of being the acme of an artist's creation.

While Weir certainly deserves credit for the critical success of the film, a screenwriter with few credits to his name and no feature film experience at the time, Tom Schulman, also deserves equal if not greater credit. The fact is that *Dead Poets Society* was nominated for four Academy Awards including 'Best Picture' and 'Best Director', but received only one, 'Best Original Screen Play', mainly Schulman's work. Amazingly it was his first feature film script. Even more incredible, the competition for this particular Oscar included such experienced luminaries as Woody Allen, Spike Lee, and Steven Soderbergh. More importantly, since winning an academy award is not always equated with critical acclaim, nor is it necessarily an artistic judgment, *Dead Poets Society* also won the award for 'Best (foreign) Film' at BAFTA (UK), 'Best Film' at the Cesar Awards

(France), and the 'Best Foreign Film' at the David di Donatello Awards (Italy). Thus we can at least say that the film was recognized as excellently crafted by an international group of peers around the time of its release.

Next, let us think about what the film has to say. While there have been many glowing reviews of *Dead Poets Society*, I have also read popular reviews which use words like 'manipulative' (in the sense of being designed to get a desired response from the audience) and 'predictable'. While it is easy to assume that all or most Hollywood films are created to make money, and therefore are manipulative and predictable, I cannot agree that these words apply to *Dead Poets Society*. Schulman is no more manipulative than, say, Shakespeare himself, who always managed to appeal to many socio-economic classes and intellects in his audiences. And, from direct experience, no student was ever prepared for the final scenes of *Dead Poets Society*. Rather, it is the unexpected and the film's lack of predictability that challenge viewers rather more than provide any throwaway satisfaction. A more detailed analysis of Schulman's and Weir's skillful development of plot and character is necessary to appreciate the film's craftsmanship.

First, it seems logical to refer to stage drama as a very strong foundation for this movie. As most of the action takes place in a limited number of settings, it could be reprised in a manageable number of stage sets. More specifically, *Dead Poets Society* has many of the hallmarks of Greek tragedy. Without knowing anything at all about Tom Schulman, and as a well-educated viewer, I would have guessed he was very familiar with his Aristotle. Indeed, after sleuthing around on the Internet, I found he was in fact a philosophy major at Vanderbilt, and therefore at least introduced to Aristotle, and most likely Aristotle's *Outline of Tragedy* (In *Poetics*). Whether he was influenced by Aristotle or not when writing it, *Dead Poets Society* certainly exhibits many of the features of tragedy as Aristotle first conceived of it. Therefore plot and character can be judged in that light.

The plot involves a group of 16-year old boys attending a prestigious preparation school, Welton Academy, in the Northeastern United States. We will talk more about character later, but basically the movie explores how the group is influenced by John Keating, an honor student and graduate of Welton, and now returning as a replacement English literature teacher there.

The movie starts innocently enough with scenes from the first day of the new school year (autumn in the United States). The school is a boarding school, so parents are dropping their children off with the usual tears from younger students, and requests from anxious parents to Dr. Hager, who, despite the appellation of Dr., appears to be nothing more than a beleaguered housemaster.

The first scenes of the movie are the entrance ceremony with the boys and their parents in attendance. We are immediately made aware of long-standing traditions of Welton Academy. The boys are wearing business-like blazers, ties, and grey slacks. Bag pipers accompany boys bearing the school standard down a central aisle to the dais. A candle representing the 'light of knowledge' is lit and passed along the first rows of younger boys, who in turn light their own candles. Presumably this part of the ceremony is symbolic of the transfer of knowledge from the wise to the not yet wise. All in attendance are asked to solemnly repeat the four pillars of Welton's educational philosophy, 'tradition', 'honor', 'excellence', and 'discipline'. Mr. Nolan, the school headmaster, gives a resounding speech about the achievements of Welton Academy and its students. We learn that the boys are bound for the Ivy League universities and that Welton, at least in Nolan's opinion, is the 'finest preparatory academy in the United States'. Superficially, then, it is all a very impressive ceremony taking place at an impressive school.

As the boys and parents leave the ceremony together, we are introduced to a major character, Neil Perry, and his father. Mr. Perry seems like any other proud parent with a child who is willingly doing what is wanted. For his part, Neil acts the obedient son. Yet there are very early

indications that something is not quite right. Towards his father, his speech is peppered with formal expressions of obeisance such as 'I'll do my best, Sir' (5 : 14), and then 'Father' as opposed to 'Dad' (7 : 49). It seems overly stiff relative to the average American family even at that time.

After the ceremony, the boys return to their dorm rooms and the masks begin to be stripped away. Neil meets his new roommate, the rather awkward Todd Anderson. Then, Charlie Dalton and Knox Overstreet, who will become main characters in the film, along with Steven Meeks, arrive to indulge in some clandestine smoking. Still things seem normal, almost too normal one might say. Neil reveals that, at the 'suggestion' of his father, he has attended summer school. The boys plan study groups.

It is here that Schulman introduces the first of several dramatic inflection points to build tension. Mr. Perry suddenly appears outside Neil's room. He enters and announces that Neil must quit his assistant editor's position on the school newspaper. Neil is clearly shaken by this news, shaken enough to utter some subdued dissent at which his father quickly ushers Neil out of the dorm room. In a private conversation in the hall, Mr. Perry reveals himself to be quite harsh and controlling. He will not brook even minor disagreement from Neil or any deviation from his own plan for Neil. Mr. Perry's insists that Neil must go to Harvard and become a doctor. Neil does not offer any significant resistance, responding meekly with 'Yes Sir. I'm sorry.' (8 : 32).

In the next scene, Neil and his friends discuss the situation and all admit to a resentment of domineering parents. I think Schulman, in these early scenes, powerfully evokes the eternal angst of teenagers full of desires, which, for the most part, cannot be fulfilled. Attempts are met by an impenetrable wall of rules and sanctions thrown up by adults. Moreover, and germane to this movie, it is clear that none of the boys are allowed the 'luxury' of being in charge of their own destinies. Through minor acts of rebellion such as reprising the school's four pillars as 'travesty', 'horror', 'decadence' 'excrement' (6 : 47) or illicit smoking, the boys express their



discontent privately, but any further challenges such as Neil's attempt to discuss the school newspaper decision are met with overt pressure, and even aggression as with Mr. Perry. We see a pattern emerging, and the school will also savagely repress any attempts to deviate from school traditions and other social norms.

Having established this mood in the action, enter Mr. John Keating. Keating, with his unusual teaching style, teaches his students the passion of poetry and literature and, in the process, encourages the boys to explore their own passions. Indeed Keating's first lesson is to illustrate the meaning of 'carpe diem' or 'seize the day'. Possibly his motivation is to show the wellspring of much Western poetry (among which we must include Shakespeare), especially that written by those who lived passionately. In fact the first poet he refers to is Byron. "Oh Captain, my captain ...' Who knows where that comes from?" he asks during his first lesson (12 : 38). His teaching tactics range from having the boys rip woodenly written introductory pages from their textbooks to having them stand on his desk to 'see the world differently', an act that will become significant at the end of the movie.

McAllister, the Latin teacher and self-described 'realist', engages Keating in a friendly discussion on his unorthodox methods of teaching. McAllister cautions Keating that his teaching will lead to disappointment when the students realize that they cannot all be artists. Keating ripostes that he is trying to create free thinkers. Their discussion ends with a telling and prophetic exchange of lines of poetry :

**McAllister**: "Show me the heart unfettered by foolish dreams and I'll show you a happy man."

**John Keating**: "But only in their dreams can men be truly free. 'Twas always thus, and always thus will be."

**McAllister**: Tennyson?

**John Keating**: No, Keating.

(27 : 42)

Apparently, Keating's lessons are just what the students want to hear. Keating overwhelmingly succeeds in conquering the boys' distaste for poetry probably engendered in previous English literature classes traditionally taught. Moreover, it is the overarching implications of what Keating does and says they retain. 'Seize the day' becomes one of their mottos reaching beyond the classroom and poetry and now a driving force in the plot. Whatever the intended purpose of his teaching, some of the students (the main characters) without being explicitly encouraged to by Keating, begin to act with a new sense of license. The result, for which Keating must take at least partial responsibility, is to nearly tear Welton Academy apart.

The Dead Poets Society, the name of the secret society formed by boys, is also key to plot development. Curious about their new teacher, the boys find the annual from Keating's graduating year and see an enigmatic reference to the Dead Poets Society. Further consumed with curiosity, they pursue Keating and finally appear to wheedle the information out of him. At first, when Neil asks, 'What's the Dead Poets Society?', Keating responds, 'I doubt whether the present administration would look to favorably upon that' (29 : 12). Also, as Neil presses further, Keating replies, 'Gentlemen, can you keep a secret?' It is difficult to imagine how any boy of that age could resist the temptation to reincarnate a secret society, or for that matter even keep it secret. Arguably, this is what Keating intended all along.

While Keating may believe participation in the Dead Poets Society will encourage a love of poetry or free thinking, what he starts among the boys ends badly. Not only does he partly contribute to an impossible situation for Neil, but he also ends up at odds with Mr. Nolan who is very intent on pleasing the parents by ensuring that their sons will go to one of the Ivy League universities. Nolan believes that the way to do this is to give students a very traditional education (including Latin, for example) in conjunction with very strict rules for conduct while enrolled at Welton.

In any case, a tome of poetry signed by Keating with instructions for use mysteriously appears in one of Neil's desk drawers. Again, we can hardly absolve Keating from blame in the ensuing tragedy that takes place. The first meeting of the Dead Poets Society is held. Neil reads poems marked by Keating, and other students recite their own poems. From the end of that meeting several characters draw on the exhilarating experience to act on their own desires.

For example, Knox Overstreet, a somewhat comic character, is invited to dine with the Danburys who live near the school. They are family friends. Apparently, Mr. Danbury is also a graduate of Welton, and now a successful lawyer (and probably a major donor to Welton). The meeting is encouraged by Welton Academy as evidenced by the fact that Dr. Hager (the housemaster) is commissioned to chauffeur Knox to the Danbury residence. There Knox meets a local girl, Chris, who is the girlfriend of son Chet Danbury. Chet and Chris attend the same public school and Chet is the football team captain. Chris is a cheerleader. Knox is immediately smitten with Chris though the odds of Knox dating Chris would seem to be insurmountable. Yet, inspired by Keating's idea of 'carpe diem', and egged on by his classmates, Knox begins a rather daring (some might say Byronic) courtship of Chris. Even though he is beaten up by Chet, we may assume his efforts are successful at least as far as Schulman's plot takes us.

Many of my students found this thread of the movie somewhat unsatisfying. Following the dramatic events surrounding Neil and Keating, the Knox / Chris storyline just disappears. On the other hand, it strikes me as a useful sub-plot, since it illustrates a pattern of action Schulman felt was necessary. From Keating's teachings and from their secret society, the boys draw strength to realize the goals of their passion. I do not assign any great significance other than that to the Knox / Chris sub-plot, but neither do I find it a plot flaw. In real life friends and family enter our lives at various points as well as recede. For Schulman, the Knox / Chris story had served its purpose which is why it is dissolved.

I was not troubled by the inconclusiveness of this particular plot thread.

Another lesser but important character is Charlie Dalton, later 'Nuwanda'. Charlie is clearly the result of wealthy parents with enough money to cede the responsibility of raising their wayward son to Welton Academy. He is most likely disillusioned by his parents' rejection. He gives the impression of being private-school savvy and fully aware of all the hypocrisy implicit in the upper crust private school system. As such, he wholeheartedly, even if misguidedly, embraces the mission of The Dead Poets Society, which he interprets to be playing pranks on the school administration. He secretly inserts an editorial in the school newspaper recommending that girls be allowed to enroll. Unfortunately he signs it 'Dead Poets Society' which sets off the first of two witch hunts for members. Nolan, quite in character, completely overreacts and calls a school assembly to commence the sweep for members. The assembly is abruptly halted when, improbably, a phone rings close to Charlie. The assembly falls completely silent as Charlie answers. He then announces to Mr. Nolan that the call is for him and the caller is God. Thus, Charlie intentionally cooks his own goose.

A childish prank, yes, but Charlie is given quite a spanking by Nolan with a scary-looking device resembling a canoe paddle and of similar size. Despite the punishment, Charlie takes complete responsibility for both pranks, and does not give up the names of the Dead Poet Society members. He exhibits this kind of fiber to the end. When Nolan convenes a kangaroo court to pin Neil's death on Keating, Charlie is the only student to keep secret the members' names. He is expelled for his effort. It is a Pyrrhic victory, since all the other students succumb to the intense pressure to 'hang' Keating. But, it is a victory nevertheless. My students certainly expressed that opinion also.

Based on the usual Hollywood practices, it would be natural to assume that this movie is about John Keating (which is what Disney wanted). This would be a fair preconception considering that Keating was played by the already well-established Robin Williams (*The World*

*According to Garp* 1982, *Good Morning Vietnam* 1987). Robin Williams was certainly talented enough to play a much larger role or even make more of the Keating role than he did. Sean Leonard (Neil), 19 at the time of shooting, and Ethan Hawke (Todd) 18, were just too young to have any significant credits or experience and were even considered liabilities to the movie's success by Disney muckety-mucks. It is of great credit that Williams chose not to steal the show, or that Peter Weir chose not to let him.

As it turned out, while I feel that the Keating character works as a tragic figure in many ways, his character is less well fleshed out than the other leading characters who are all students. We know that he graduated from Welton with honors although it seems, to use Charlie's word, he himself was a 'hell raiser'. He taught for several years in England at another prestigious preparatory academy. We know that he left a lover behind on returning to the United States. Beyond that, we know little except through his unusual teaching style and the actions he takes in the movie.

In terms of motivation, it is difficult to tell if he is aware of how gravely he is challenging the received wisdom of Welton. He seems genuinely surprised when Nolan confronts him about his unusual teaching style after Charlie's telephone stunt. Even if he is aware, it is not clear why. Most importantly, we don't know why he returned to Welton in the first place. I consider these points to be minor mistakes of character development as well as plot development. It could perhaps be explained, as opposed to excused, by the fact that the original idea for Keating was somewhat different. Keating was supposed to die of leukemia at the end the movie according to the Disney plan. This would have not only put Keating at the center of the plot, but also provided more motivation for Keating to do what he does. However, Weir wanted the movie to focus on the students. While the Keating character is not complete, the movie would seem to be better for the leukemia deletion.

In any case, probably long before the end of the movie, and certainly

by after the play, the audience can guess that Keating is going to take the fall for whatever happens. He is unable to see that he is the wrong teacher at the wrong time and place and that, I believe, counts as a kind of tragic hubris. After Neil's suicide, Nolan, at the request of Mr. Perry, declares he will make a full investigation into Neil's death. However, the secret agenda is to make Keating the scapegoat and absolve the school of any responsibility. The Dead Poets Society is also considered to be a contributing factor. Cameron, abiding by the school's honor code, willingly discloses their names. Then each member of the Dead Poets is forced into an intimidating meeting, parents present, in which they are asked, some might say compelled, to sign a statement incriminating Keating.

Some critics describe this movie as 'an inspirational teacher movie.' Indeed many of my students said they would like to have Keating as a teacher. Yet I contend that this is not the main 'raison d'être' for this film. Other movies, such as *Stand and Deliver* (1988) and *Freedom Writers* (2007) are simple stories of excellent teachers working under difficult situations. Keating may have been an inspirational teacher. However, in this movie's plot, we know nothing of his motivation and the positive results of his teaching aren't completely clear. We do know what his teachings lead to in this movie: a nearly inevitable confrontation with the school resulting in his termination; indirectly the death of one its students; and, of course, the expulsion of Charlie could be attributed in part to Keating as well.

Neil is much more a central character of the film. Thwarted in his plans to continue as newspaper assistant editor, he decides to audition for a local rendition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the nearby town. Next plot inflection. If he gets the part, according to school rules, he will need to seek his father's permission to join the cast. He is overjoyed to find he has been awarded the part of Puck. However, Neil opts to forge the necessary letter rather than discuss it with his father. Like all students of that age, Neil is not quite as sneaky as he needs to be. Mr. Perry soon finds out from the mother of another student in the play that Neil is indeed a

member of the cast. A nasty altercation occurs when Neil returns to his dorm room from rehearsal, and his angry father is there. Predictably, Neil is unable to mount any effective verbal opposition, and Mr. Perry orders Neil to withdraw from the play. Neil appears to accede to his father's wish, but later he consults with Keating on his predicament. In this case Keating gives the right advice that Neil must talk to his father. The next day, Keating asks Neil if he talked to his father, and Neil says he did. In fact, he did not.

The audience may now be aware that Neil's fate is drawing quickly nearer. Without talking with his father, and lying even to Keating that he did, Neil appears in the play. Again, Neil is not nearly sneaky enough. The suspicious Mr. Perry appears at the play, and, even after Neil's brilliant performance, his opposition to Neil's acting is undiminished. He unceremoniously hauls Neil out of the theater. Later, at the Perry home, Mr. Perry has also preemptively removed Neil from Welton and enrolled him in a military academy.

I think what follows is Schulman's stroke of genius. Neil, who has rebelled against his father, now finds himself in what he considers an intolerable situation. He has reached the bottom through his inaction, and the bottom is from whence tragic characters emerge to take action. Now he has only a limited number of responses, and only one in his mind. We, including some jaded critics of the film, have to remember what it was like to be 16 or 17 and how even fairly minor setbacks seemed like the end of the world. Neil's earlier actions, which merely served to circumvent the tyranny of both his father and his school, have led to the cruelest repression imaginable. Rather than realizing his dream, or even being allowed to stay at Welton, he now faces the much more tightly controlled environment of a military academy. This would be no minor setback for any teenager, let alone one as sensitive as Neil. "But father, that's ten more years. That's a life time," he cries, his voice nearly breaking (1 : 40 : 33). In his mind suicide seems like the only option and that is the course he takes.

Knowing the fate of Neil, as I do now, it is always with a twinge of pain that I watch my students' reactions to these final scenes. To the very last minute, they hope that Neil will talk with his father and that Neil's father will soften his position. Weir's final high camera angle on Neil collapsed in an armchair vividly portrays the absolute defeat in all his body. I can see that the students now suspect only seconds before the tragedy that hope has been snatched away. Yet, when we know the ending, we look back and think, "How could it have ended any differently?"

I would like to return to Aristotle's conception of tragedy, and more specifically to Shakespeare. Watching Neil's torment is very much like watching Hamlet's. Son of an assassinated father living with the assassin – step father, Hamlet does want to kill Claudius and revenge his father's murder. Yet the reasonable life-preserving course of action would be to accept the situation as is. Equally clearly, Neil would be better to confront his father and conquer Mr. Perry's narrow minded and self-centered obsession with Neil being a doctor. However, the consequences of these actions are unacceptable according to the character of each protagonist. Both Hamlet and Neil are sensitive, thoughtful people, but also indecisive and thus find themselves at war with themselves and circumstances. For Neil, the politic course would be to accept his father's plan, which is, after all, not completely without merit. The passionate course is to pursue his acting no matter how reckless it may seem to his father. Every person who watches Hamlet must cherish the hope that Hamlet will resolve the conflict between reason and passion. We may also say this about Neil whom we hope will resolve the frustrating conflict with his father. After Neil's great performance as Puck, the stubborn resistance of his father is still not overcome. It is then we must know there is no good resolution to this problem.

Drama, especially tragedy, derives from the fact that the audience knows more than any one character, and we can see the possible outcomes of any one character's action whereas he/she cannot. While the circumstances may seem to indicate one course of action to the audience,



the character must act not only according to the circumstances set out by the playwright, but also to his/her own personality also established by the playwright. If there is one common character flaw in Hamlet and Neil, it is indecision caused by fear of the consequences, and thus failure to act decisively until the bottom has been reached. That is the textbook definition of tragic hubris.

Interestingly, several students commented that Neil triumphed. Certainly, Weir's imagery supports this conclusion. In the final scenes before his death, Neil strips down, dons Puck's mock crown, and at the open window bears his body to the full elements of a Northeast winter storm. Seemingly it is his last effort to 'suck the marrow out of life', as Keating has taught him, before taking his own life. Again, Neil's agony is synonymous with Hamlet's. Both triumph, but at the ultimate price. At least I think it is a testament to Schulman's gift that multiple interpretations can be attributed to the fate of Neil. To me that is a true mark of craftsmanship.

Todd Anderson is certainly the most enigmatic character and arguably the central character of the film. He enters the school with the fine reputation of his brother to live up to, a task which he appears little prepared to do. He is awkward and tends to stutter. He tries to withdraw from the activities of other students. Todd, at Neil's urging, agrees to attend the Dead Poets Society first meeting only after he says he will only do so provided he does not have to say anything. Todd's parents seem to be oblivious to the specific needs of Todd. They send him the exact same birthday gift as the previous year. More importantly, the expectation that he will be the cookie cutter version of his brother seems likely to repress Todd if unchecked. It is only through the exceptional friendship and kindness of Neil that Todd begins to emerge from the shell. Keating is also of great importance. He helps Todd discover his real talent, poetry. Towards the end of the movie, when they boys are preparing to attend Neil's play, Todd seems to have integrated well into the school.

Todd is most affected by the death of Neil. Moreover, when he finds

out that Keating is the intended scapegoat in the investigation of Neil's death, Todd is the most offended by the injustice of it. He truly has grown. Nevertheless, Todd caves in to the intense pressure of the school and his parents to implicate Keating. Yet unlike some of the other boys, he is wracked with remorse.

In the end Neil is dead, Keating is out, and our student protagonists are beaten back into their molds. *Dead Poets Society* is not without hope, however, and Peter Weir has one more surprise for us. In the final scenes, Nolan takes over Keating's class and tries to return it to the dullness so standard at Welton. Unfortunately for Nolan, replacing Keating will not be quite so easy as he thinks. For example the students have no introduction pages to their poetry text as these have been ripped out. We also find that Keating skipped around a lot, so where to start becomes an exasperating problem for the doctrinaire Nolan. Worse, Keating arrives to pick up his things, and Nolan grudgingly grants access to the classroom. Keating collects a few books and papers. Suddenly, as Keating is about to leave, Todd, no longer able to restrain himself, jumps to his feet and blurts how they were all forced to sign the affidavit about Keating's conduct. Todd is told to sit down by Nolan, but no sooner is he seated than he stands up on his desk and calls to Keating 'Oh Captain, my Captain'. Not all but many of the boys gradually join him in a moving tribute to Keating's teaching and ideas. Among the rubble of Welton, Fortinbras has arrived.

No analysis of a movie would be complete without a final word about the cinematography and setting. Of note are the bird scenes (9 : 49-10 : 06) in which we see beautiful flocks of birds swirling en masse. Against the fall colors of Vermont, this is certainly a breathtaking spectacle. However, they seem to be responding to Welton's sonorous school bell in the background. Is this the result of a random shot by a camera man and accidental addition of school bells by a Foley artist? I think not. The school bell represents the school and the birds the expected conformity of the students of Welton. Another seemingly random scene is the rowing

scene (44 : 46). Yet is it? Some of our boys, Cameron and Knox, are apparently members of the team and Mr. Nolan is either the cox or coach. Rowing is certainly a feature of many prestigious schools supposedly designed to build school and team spirit. Also, it requires that rowers do exactly the same thing at the same time under the direction of a cox. Again, the image of conformity is reinforced. The school itself is an imposing fortress-like structure communicating all the power and prestige possible. This is in stark contrast to where the 'rebellion' begins in the Dead Poets Society's dank and dirty cave.

A writer or practitioner of the fine arts with energy and genius may be wholly responsible for his/her own work and its success. This is not true of film which is a distinctly collaborative effort. It is even unlike mounting a play because of the many more options of location, technical / special effects, and actors to choose from. Moreover, there are so many more support people involved. Indeed, it is practically a miracle that any decent movie gets made at all. It is a rare treat, then, when the right people come together with the same motivation to make something really fine.

In spite of these odds against it, *Dead Poets Society* meets many of the criteria of being a masterpiece. I believe it does to today's audiences what the Greek tragedians and Shakespeare did to audiences so many hundreds and thousands of years ago. The plot seems just right to me. There is interior logic to every scene. At the level of cinematography, settings match and elaborate on the action. Most importantly, I do not see evidence of Schulman or Weir telling us what to think or giving audiences an easily accessible ending. The ending is tragic, but also hopeful as a good tragedy should be.

Finally, is it a masterpiece? It is not the best movie I have ever seen, but very near the top of the list. It is most certainly the best movie I have seen based on an original screen play. As such, I think it meets two of the criteria I laid out in the introduction. First, it is well made and simply works on every level. The story and plot flow, and the characters are well

conceived and well-portrayed. The cinematography is appropriate and engaging. Second, it reflects on many important issues such as love, suicide, youth, parents, education, and even human existence. Why are we here? Most importantly, it challenges us with a dramatic question that dates back to antiquity, 'To what degree are we creatures of reason or of passion?' This theme will never disappear as a main force in drama, of that I am sure.

However, it is the third question, 'Is it enduring?' that is less certain. It surely has many of the features of other tragedies that have endured from generation to generation. Also, it speaks to people (my students for example) widely separated in time, culture, and place. I have witnessed that 20 times or more. However, if I am asked, 'Will people still be watching this movie 100 or 200 years from now?' I'd have to say I really do not know. My chief concern would be that it will just disappear among the ever increasing numbers of less worthy 'blockbusters'. Also, in my own research, I failed to find much scholarly research on this film or any other. The movie world simply lacks an academic presence far enough removed from the film centers to make independent and informed judgments. All I am willing to venture now is, regardless of the long odds of any movie being still watched in the distant future, I believe people will continue to watch and enjoy this film for some time. Is it a masterpiece? I can only say that perhaps, but perhaps it is too early to tell.

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