

A reflection on the movie "dead poet's society" essay sample

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



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History constantly witnesses the never-ending struggle between tradition and innovation. As an old adage goes, “ the only constant thing in this world is change” and it is indeed true. The society that we have today is a by-product of continuous changes — changes that generations before us believed to be for the better. Thus, history serves as a “ storehouse” of information that can help us understand change and how the society we live in came to be.

The definition of History as a “ natural tension between tradition and innovation” is best represented in the movie Dead Poet’s Society. Set in 1959, the movie is the story of students at the respected “ Welton Academy”, an all-boys preparatory school in Vermont. Such schools were (and often still are) very conservative institutions that serve as high schools for parents who insist on sending their children to the best universities.

The story is an all-common scene in our history: a traditional way of living and doing things is initially present. Almost everyone is conforming to that tradition since it is the “ best” way people know on how to do things. Not everybody may be happy but the familiarity that the tradition brings provides comfort and security. Then come along a different (either good or bad) idea to change how things are originally done. The traditionalists will resist and even condone the change while the proponents of innovation will try to prove that the change is for the better. The changes may persist in a particular society, and as the time goes on, these changes will be embedded

on the culture until it becomes the new tradition, which new changes will, again, try to contest. And again, the whole cycle begins.

In the movie, the tradition is represented by the educational system where students memorized and translated the central works of the distant past, learning ancient languages, rhetoric, and simple mathematics by rote. Professors emphasized accuracy and not comprehension. Conservative and conformist, Welton, like any other early colleges had little interest either in expanding knowledge or in inciting critical thinking. Lessons were infused with a deeply religious vision of the world and of the duties both as a citizen and as a family-member. The colleges saw themselves as bulwarks against change, training the pastors, doctors, and lawyers of the next generation. Largely driven by a sense of tradition, the school imposes out-dated teaching techniques on both its teachers and its students. The students are encouraged to mindlessly take in facts and regurgitate them on command. The teachers are expected to teach according to a rigid set of rules. But change arrived regardless, driven by the needs of a growing society.

The innovation in the movie is represented by John Keating, the newest professor at and a former graduate of Welton. Compared with the dry, bland teachings of the other professors at the academy, Keating actually speaks to the students. So unique and out of the ordinary are his words that the students are awe-struck, and uncertain how to respond. Whereas other teachers merely lecture and delegate, Keating pushes his students to be involved, to think, to use their minds. He believes that education requires the student to think for himself. He emphasized that the students must be free

to question and to learn in the way that they learn best. He also wants to ensure that they really learn to experience life, to “suck the marrow” out of it. Through this encouragement, he was able to reach his students like none of the teachers before him did, though few schools accept the basic premise of his teachings and Welton Academy is no exception.

Coming into conflict with John Keating’s motivating speeches about finding one’s own voice are years of tradition, involving both the academy and the families whose children attend the academy. These two irrepressible forces (Keating’s innovative way of teaching and Welton’s traditional system of education) are destined for a collision, which is brought about by this age-old conflict of traditional compulsion versus freedom and flexibility. Keating rejects tradition and refuses to teach by the old methods. The school refuses to accept change. And so the battle begins.

Keating’s first act of business is to ask one of the students to read the first four lines of Robert Herrick’s “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time,” the most famous “carpe diem” or “seize the day” poem in English: “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may: / Old time is still a-flying; / And this same flower that smiles today, / Tomorrow will be dying.” Keating follows this up with a reminder that we are “food for worms.” This is a somewhat unorthodox invocation of the time-honored adage about life being too short. It is certainly appropriate for a teacher to use this perhaps unusual but highly effective method to drive home the point that young people are only young for a “short” time and that they should thus make the most of their time by seizing the day, thus making their “lives extraordinary.” The fact that all this

takes place in front of a class picture of a long-ago student body on the wall (the members of which are by that time probably all dead) just delivers the point Keating is making with that much more relevance and effectiveness.

In the scene where Keating asks the students to tear the pages out of their textbook, we witness the second major scene involving Keating's ingenious and most effective teachings methods. Part of the secret of Keating's success with his students is, of course, the fact that he levels with them, that he tells them (and occasionally shows them, too) what he firmly believes is the truth. The essay, " Understanding Poetry," by J. Evans Pritchard, Ph. D., is indeed " excrement" (to use Keating's own characterization of it). The " greatness" of a poem is not to be grafted onto horizontal and vertical lines where the first represents the " perfection" (as to rhythm, meter, and rhyme) and the second the " importance" (as to theme) of a given poem. As Keating tells the students after they have torn the offending pages from the book, " we don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. Medicine, law, business, engineering, these are all noble pursuits, and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for."

It is in the next classroom scene that Keating performs his famous stunt of standing upon the desk to remind the students that - as he puts it - we " must constantly look at things in a different way." " Just when you think you know something," he tells them a moment later, " you have to look at it in another way." He urges them to think when they read " not just what the

author thinks. Consider what you think” as well. He urges them, too, to find their own voices. There is no time to waste. The more habitual their thinking becomes, the more difficult it will be to change it later on. It is interesting to reflect in this connection on the fact that both George McAllister, a fellow teacher, and Mr. Nolan object (the first mildly, the second vehemently) to Keating’s attempt to make 17-year-olds think for themselves.

On the other hand, the case of Neil (one of Keating’s students) and his father represents an altogether different standpoint on how we can view tradition and innovation. It is a tradition during that time for a child to follow his parents (father, in particular) regardless of the child’s personal preference. In the movie, Neil’s relationship with his father is a case of misunderstanding and lack of communication. Mr. Perry wanted what was best for his son, which led to extremely high expectations. Neil wanted to find out who he was and what he wanted to do. Neil was unable to discuss his opinions and options with his father, and Mr. Perry was unwilling to look at Neil’s outlook on life, as it did not appear as Neil had a concrete idea of what he wanted to do. This cyclical pattern led Neil to conclude that suicide was the only way to gain control of his life and stand up to his father.

Mr. Perry was a traditionalist, which unfortunately meant he had a difficult time expressing affectionate emotions. He also had a large number of expectations because like any parent, he ultimately wanted the best for his son, a 16-17 year old with a bright future ahead of him. Unfortunately, Neil never really saw or understood that his father only wanted what was best for Neil. He only saw the tyrant-like authority figure who constantly demanded

that Neil achieve greatness in academia and who obeyed him unquestioningly.

In this situation, the father and son were like strangers, each with a specific perception of the other, but neither really knew who the other was. This perpetuated the cycle of misunderstandings between the two and eventually played a major role in Neil's suicide. At that moment, it is evident that Neil is not happy with the traditional way his father treats him. He wanted a change, but he never really stood up to his father. There were times he tried, like when Mr. Perry told Neil he should drop some extracurricular activities, but he did so in the presence of others, which created a hostile environment between the two. The story of Neil's life would have been different if he was just brave and innovative enough to think of ways on how he can positively affect his father's belief without antagonizing him. It would have been interesting if Neil and his father would have actually sat down and chatted about what Neil wanted and what they could do to compromise.

Neil's situation is an example where change is inevitable. But the inability of the characters to cope with these changes led to their own destruction.

In general, we can say that while we have held fast to our common values as a society and as an individual, the one true constant in this world has been that of creative change. If our institutions hope to remain relevant to our society and to our state, this tradition of adaptation and evolution must continue.