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*Uncovering the True Meaning of Dead Poets Society*

On the surface, the movie *Dead Poets Society* appears to be the tale of five boys finding a passion for poetry and classic literature, as encouraged by John Keating, a new English teacher. The boys resurrect a group that meets in secret from Keating's era, called the Dead Poets Society. The meetings are held in a cave in the woods, where the boys read the works of notable poets, as well as sharing their original creations. Beneath the obvious plot and storyline, however, a deeper meaning can be found. Writer Tania Modleski asserts in her essay "Dead White Male Heterosexual Poets Society" that the film is an example of an "hysterical text", which she defines in her article as a work in which the importance of the underlying story, or "the weight of the un-said", is of equal or greater importance than the film's obvious meaning (Modleski 137). In the case of *Dead Poets Society*, Modleski takes the stand that the content that is un-said "is related to homoeroticism and gay sexuality" (137). Modleski's essay digs beneath the surface plot and successfully manages to convince readers that Peter Weir, the director of the film *Dead Poets Society* inserted several "disclaimers", token roles, plots and storylines to draw the viewer away from the underlying subject of repressed homosexuality (139).

While the story ostensibly follows the story of an entire English class, as well as that of their new professor, John Keating, a few main characters emerge that support even more strongly Modleski's idea that the film's underlying story revolves around three (or more) of the main characters struggling to come to terms with their homosexuality in a repressed 1950s society.

John Keating, the new professor tells the boys that they should "strive to find their own voice" and "dare to strike out and find new ground" (*DPS*). Modleski's essay dissects the true meaning behind the lessons that Keating teaches. The essay infers that Keating's instructions to "find your own voice" and "march your own way" are encouragements for those students who are repressing their homosexuality to "come out of the closet" and embrace their true natures, despite the opposition they may face (Modleski 140). Additionally, the argument can be made that Keating himself is gay, and has been "in the closet" due to society's intolerance, and he is urging the boys to strike out and succeed where he did not, in "finding his voice" as a gay man.

One of the "disclaimers" Modleski mentions is the photograph of Keating's fiancée that is shown on his desk. The prop seems to shout "See? He's straight! He has a fiancée!" No back story is given regarding the woman in the photo, and it is presented during a scene when Neil and Keating are speaking in Keating's office. The tone of the conversation revolves around Keating prompting Neil to follow his heart and inspiration, and to "find his voice" despite the obstacles in the way. This leads the viewer to believe that the woman was just such an "obstacle", and perhaps one that Keating left behind in order to follow HIS true inspiration, which is helping children realize their true worth and potential, and not that which an authority figure sets forth for them. An alternative interpretation for the photo is that Keating himself felt that he was "in the closet" with his fiancée, which led him to leave her behind to pursue the homosexual lifestyle that he is really interested in. All of the "disclaimers" are added up, it gives the feeling that the filmmakers protest too strongly that the film is not about repressed homosexuality. Modleski implies that the very fact that the story needed these small reminders of what the story is supposed to be about is proof that a deeper layer truly does exist in the story (139).

Another main character, Neil seems to be the student that is most inspired by Keating. Although his father has absolute control over his life and the activities Neil participates in, after Keating's "Carpe Diem" lecture, he begins to find ways to rebel and assert his rights as a man. He resurrects the Dead Poets Society, and convinces fellow classmates to join. He chooses to audition for a role in an upcoming play, despite his father's wishes that he abstain from extracurricular activities and focus on study. The play that inspires him so much that he is willing to defy the father to whom he has given respect and deference to his entire life is Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He auditions for, and receives, the role of Puck the "fairy", a word that American society has grown to accept almost synonymously with "gay" or "homosexual". Modleski's essay expands on the significance of the role that Neil plays, implying that the conflict between Neil and his father is not over whether Neil should be allowed to act, but whether he should be allowed to "pose as a fairy", or come out of the closet and embrace homosexuality (139).

When Neil's father discovers that his son has participated in this activity, he is enraged to the point of removing Neil from the school. Neil has spent his whole life wearing the metaphorical "blindness" that his father has forced on him by removing all his opportunities to think for himself and make his own choices. The lessons that Keating has taught him have empowered him to remove those blinders himself, and the "new" Neil seems enlightened and accepting of his homosexuality. Faced with the impossible prospect of being forced "back into the closet" and back under his father's thumb, Neil makes the very drastic decision to end his life, rather than being forced to lead someone else's life indefinitely. The movie tries to more obviously imply that the finality and outrageousness of the action that Neil takes is over not being allowed to attend Welton or pursue a career as an actor. Modleski's essay helps the viewer

see that his reasons for committing suicide were far deeper than simply the oppression of his father. Director Peter Weir uses the phallic symbolism of the gun to illustrate the idea that through his final, fatal act, he has made the transition from boy to man. Interestingly, in the film, Neil adopts the homosexual persona of “Puck” before he kills himself. It seems as if he distances himself from the old Neil, the one who was forced to bend to his father’s will. Neil had no choices, and suicide was not an acceptable option for him. By breaking away as Puck, he embraced the inner self that he discovered, and asserted his right to make the choice between life as Neil and death as Puck. If the subtext is true, and Neil is actually gay, then his suicide might be attributed to his anticipation of his father's extremely negative reaction to having a homosexual son. An indicator of how poorly Neil's revelation would have been received actually comes after his death, when his father refuses to shoulder any of the blame or responsibility for Neil's suicide. Even his son's death cannot convince him that his ways might be in error.

Another main character in the movie, Todd, also seems to be struggling with issues of repressed sexuality. He seems resistant at first to participation in the Dead Poets Society, and seems to succumb to his friends’ wishes for him to attend. This sets him up initially as a conformist, one who will mold himself to the wishes of others to be accepted. This is representative of his façade as a heterosexual male, who behaves in a “straight” manner because that is what is expected of him. At the end of the movie, after Neil has killed himself, Keating is used as the scapegoat for his demise. When Keating is fired by the school, and comes in to collect his belongings, Todd bursts out with an apology for the role he played in helping the principal accuse Keating of wrongdoing. He stands up on the desk in an act of non-conformity and shouts “O Captain, My Captain” as a gesture of allegiance to Keating (*DPS*). This signifies to the viewer that Todd has broken out of his conformist shell and has also likely accepted and

acknowledged his feelings of homosexuality, having been given the courage to do so both by Keating's teachings, as well as Neil's sacrifice.

A relevant "disclaimer" to Todd are the small roles played by Todd's parents. Todd is introduced in the movie as a younger brother to a previous student at Welton, who graduated at the top of his class and became a National Merit Scholar. This immediately sets up the fact that Todd is trying to live up to the expectations of his parents, which are based on the example set by his older brother. In the movie, his parents send him a birthday gift, which is the exact item that he was sent the year before, a desk set. Also, the parents appear at the end of the movie, after Neil's death, and order Todd to sign the paper stating that Keating was at fault. It seems that these roles could have been omitted entirely, since the idea of detached, yet oppressive parents was already addressed by Neil's situation.

One of the most notable examples of "disclaimers" in the film is the sub-plot of Knox pursuing a girl from another high school, despite her football-player boyfriend, is so "in your face" and uncomplicated that it seems to be an attempt by the filmmakers to insist to the viewer that this movie is not about homosexual repression, but rather a general inspiration to "seize the day". This additional plot thread does not seem to add much to the story as a whole, since the accomplishment of a boy asking a girl out seems a bit dilute, when compared to some of the changes that Keating's teachings prompted in some of the other students. While the storyline serves to add comic value to an otherwise fairly serious movie with scenes like Knox kissing a sleeping Chris and then being punched by her boyfriend, the relationship is not developed as a great, lasting love story, but merely a boy successfully wooing a girl despite her current relationship. If the story serves any purpose into the movie, it is to add an element of a heterosexual relationship, so as not to portray the implication that "all-male schools turn boys

gay.” The scene in which Knox returns to his friends and tells them that he met the “most beautiful girl” (*DPS*), after which he is mocked by his schoolmates, serves to further illustrate Modleski’s point: not all of the boys at that school can appreciate a relationship between Knox and Chris, because some of them do not have an interest in a male/female relationship.

Modleski mentions the film's use of Walt Whitman as a "sexually ambiguous" figure, and implies that his works were used perhaps because it is a less obvious nod to homosexuality in literary figures than Oscar Wilde, who was very widely known as a gay man. Whitman's sexuality is widely debated, and according to Modleski the lack of hard proof that Whitman was gay permits the film to deny the possibility (137-138). Whitman plays a very prominent role in the movie, with Keating even going so far as to refer to him as "Uncle Walt", implying a sense of familial intimacy (*DPS*). It is unlikely that Keating and Whitman actually shared common lineage, and is more likely that he feels that they are a member of the same "cultural family" of homosexuals and bisexuals. Furthermore, quotes by Whitman are used extensively throughout the movie, even by the very straight-laced principal who says to Keating, "Show me the heart unfettered by foolish dreams, and I'll show you a happy man" (*DPS*). When asked by one of the students about the Dead Poets Society, Keating says that the Society read poetry by Thoreau, Whitman and Shelley. All three of these notable poets were either confirmed to lead bisexual or homosexual lifestyles, or were widely rumored as gay.

Keating does not come across as preaching the merits of a gay lifestyle or trying to convert his students to homosexuality, but instead seems to convey a desire to make them feel free to embrace the lifestyle that they want to live, rather than the one that is forced upon them by their parents, the school's faculty, and society in general. The English class that Keating teaches is composed of twenty or so boys, however, his teachings only inspire a few of the boys

to rebel and "find their own voice." This feels symbolic of the five boys making the non-mainstream choice of homosexuality, one that makes them a minority in society. It may be meant to represent them as a subsection of the greater society as a whole, just as the gay community is typically viewed. The boys, when they first decide to meet, leave their dorm rooms in the dead of night. They are all wearing identical cloaks, which shroud them entirely in shadow. This could be again representative of the secretive nature of gay society in the 50s. There was not the acceptance that today's society has of people "coming out of the closet". The entire subject was viewed as uncomfortable, and by society's lack of willingness to address or discuss their choices, gays were encouraged to keep their secrets "in the closets", never seeing the light of day.

Even without reading more into the film, the lesson that is imparted is a valuable one. At its most simplistic interpretation, it is a story of following your heart, finding your own path, and not letting the demands and opinions of others force you to lead a life that makes you unhappy. Further examination, though, reveals a story about having the courage to embrace homosexuality, regardless of society's lack of acceptance of your choice. Through its use of "disclaimers" such as distracting sub-plots and inconsistent speech, the movie *Dead Poets Society* is able to portray the struggles and stigmas face by homosexuals in 1950s culture, without taking focus from the movie's more obvious and advertised themes.

Works Cited

*Dead Poets Society*. 1989. Dir. Peter Weir. Perf. Robin Williams and Ethan Hawke. Touchstone, 2006. DVD.

Modleski, Tania. "Dead White Male Heterosexual Poets Society." Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age. New York: Routledge, 1991. 135-40. Print.