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A Different Perspective Uncovers the True Meaning

The importance of looking at the things in life from a different perspective, an explanation stressed by teacher Mr. Keating in Peter Weir's film *Dead Poets Society*. It is when looking at this film in a different perspective that one can find the hidden meaning. Writer Tania Modleski's Essay "Dead White Male Heterosexual Poets Society" elaborates on this hidden meaning making valid points that the film on the surface may be about Carpe Diem, however underneath the film's true meaning is repression of male homosexuality. To support her assumptions, Modleski blames Weir for his of "disclaimers" (aspects of plot and or character whose sole existence is to insure the use of protagonist heterosexuality) and "textual incoherences" (things that don't quite make sense in the film). The repression of male homosexuality in the film becomes obvious while reading Modleski's essay, and while watching the film carefully a second time. Modleski appropriately challenges the truth behind Weir's film *Dead Poets Society*, and provides examples of the film's repression of homosexuality through his use of "disclaimers" and "textual incoherences" that are illustrated in characters Todd Henderson and Neil Perry.

In her essay, Modleski points out that there are scenes in the film revealing "textual incoherences" which influence the audience to believe that homosexuality is present. The characters that are most involved in these "textual incoherences" are Todd Henderson and Neil Perry. These two boys serve as the main characters in the film and are roommates at Welton

Academy, a boarding school for boys. Todd is a very shy and keeps to himself, while Neil is a loyal son who respects his father's every command. With the help of Modleski's support, these two characters most definitely possess the qualities of someone who is struggling with their sexual identity. There are a number of scenes that repress their homosexuality, but a few strong examples are: The shower scene, Todd's reaction to Knox's girlfriend, Neil's reaction to the girls Tina and Gloria coming into the cave, and lastly the ordeal with Neil's father, Mr. Perry, taking away Neil's masculinity.

Modleski points out that Todd "reveals many of the signs of a sexual identity crisis, and in a more honest version of the film might have been shown struggling to come to terms with being gay in a heterosexual, homosocial environment" (Modleski 138). Her assumptions of Todd are dead on when looked into the shower scene of the film and in a specific moment where the boys are introduced to Knox Overstreet's girlfriend Chris. During the shower scene all of the boys are talking among themselves while showering, all except Todd. Todd is fully dressed in the corner of the bathroom alone and quiet. The film brings no attention to this odd situation, and this moment like many others is brushed under a rug never to be spoken of again. But one has to wonder why he is the only one dressed. Could it be that Todd lives in fear that he might not be able to "physically" control his attraction to men? This is very likely, and the fact that he isolates himself in the corner suggests his internal struggle with being a homosexual in a heterosexual environment. Some might feel that this idea is a stretch; however it explains why Todd is fully clothed and trying desperately to keep quiet and go unnoticed by the other boys. The shower scene is powerful evidence in support of Modleski's assumption that Todd is struggling with his sexual identity.

The moment where the boys (all except Neil due to his previous commitments to the school play) are introduced to Chris is another example of Todd's evident, although it is not addressed homosexuality. This scene must be looked at very carefully with focus on the reactions of the boys when they meet Chris. When they first see her, their mouths drop to the floor and they are speechless, which is anticipated because they are teenage boys and there are no girls allowed at Welton. Todd however stands towards the back of the group and does not reflect the same emotion as the other boys. When the boys are asked to hurry along, Todd with no emotional attachment quickly leaves and the rest pull away slowly with open mouths and eager eyes. The fact that Todd expresses no infatuation or awe towards Chris is questionable because such strong emotion is expressed by the others. Seeing a girl at Welton is significant, and Todd's reaction is definitely not expected in this setting of an all boys' boarding school. Both this moment and with the shower scene show that Todd is trying to cope with his homosexuality in a heterosexual environment.

Neil's sexual identity becomes questionable towards the end of the film in a scene during which Charlie brings two women to the cave, and also through the relationship between Neil and Neil's father Mr. Perry. During the last cave scene of the film the character Charlie brings in two girls Tina and Gloria, in hopes that the two girls will be able to join the Dead Poets Society. Neil's reaction to the two women coming into the cave and possibly joining their environment consists of disappointment and silence. This is a much different reaction than all the other boys'; except for Todd of course, he seems to have nothing to say with the idea of the possible additions. As the other boys giggle and interact with the girls, staring at them with wide eyes, Todd and Neil remain in the background of these extreme heterosexual scenes.

Along with his objection to women, Neil struggles with his father taking away his masculinity. Throughout the entire film the audience witnesses a strained relationship between Neil and his extremely dominate father, Mr. Perry. Mr. Perry posses so much power over Neil that he will not allow Neil to make any of his own decisions. Whether it is being editor for the annual, or pursuing his dreams of acting in the school play, Neil's father will have none of it. Mr. Perry has already made the decision that Neil will go to Harvard and become a doctor. Neil remains loyal to his father's wishes until the role of Puck in *A Mid Summers Night Dream* catches his eye. Modleski sees Neil's interest in playing Puck has a "latent homophobic meaning" and the character is often viewed as a feministic "fairy-like" character (Modleski 139). Interesting that the film was based in the 1950's at a time when the term "fairy" was slang for a male homosexual. When Mr. Perry finds out of Neil's acting, he forbids him to continue in the play. Perhaps it is because he feels embarrassed by his son playing a role that suggests his son could be homosexual? His father's rejection becomes the last straw for Neil; Mr. Perry had taken away everything it means to be a man, Neil's ability to make his own decisions and pursue his dreams. So, Neil took it in his hands to take away the only thing he had control of, the right to live. Committing suicide is a frequent result in the situation of a homosexual's family not accepting them. The plot between Neil and is father is very similar to that of a homosexual's struggle to gain acceptance.

With such evidence of homosexuality connected to Todd and Neil it is of great curiosity why Weir did not follow through with what seems as intentional. One might say he did this because of fear on how an audience might react to the topic of homosexuality; however, Modleski states that Peter Weir's previous films "are suffused with a lyrical homoeroticism" (Modleski 138). In this case his need to constantly remind the audience of the extreme

heterosexuality through “disclaimers” such the romance between Knox and Chris which has no effect on the plot of the film is completely unnecessary. If looked at the film carefully, it is safe to say that that Weir’s meaning of the film is not of *Carpe Diem*, but repression of homosexuality and homoerotism.

Dead Poets Society is no doubt one of the best pictures known to man. It has been nominated for 3 Oscars, and ironically Peter Weir received one of them for best director. This is ironic in the fact that he was nominated for his direction, yet in *Dead Poets Society* he seemed to be confused on which direction to go. When it comes to *Dead Poets Society* director Peter Weir will always leave an open door for which the audience may choose to either stay in the closet, or come out of it. Modleski presents an effective argument upon Weir; nevertheless there is one thing that these two can agree upon, the importance of looking at things in life from a different perspective.

Works Cited

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