



## On Multiple Conflicts in *Dead Poets Society*

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### Abstract

The film *Dead Poets Society* reflects the dilemma confronted by American education in the 20th century, where traditional education makes students lose their identities. From the perspective of studying multiple conflicts, the conflict between new ideologies of the protagonist Keating and traditional ones is the foreshadowing of other conflicts. The film presents old and new ideologies, obedience and resistance and the one between being realistic and being romantic, as alternative interpretations of the educational dilemma. Keating's pursuit of freedom and opposition to traditional cognitive orientations have contributed to the student's self-awakening and projected the stranglehold of traditional education on the student's nature.

**Key words:** *Dead Poets Society*; Multiple Conflicts; Self-awareness

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### INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the American movies has already obtained an important and secure place in the movie field. Peter Weir is unquestionably considered as one of most outstanding directors, who is known for his eclectic approach to film-making. As one of the most prestigious works of Peter Weir, *Dead Poets Society* also shows a

critical attitude towards American culture, which is still similar to his early works as a whole. *Dead Poets Society* is a film with rich connotation and profounding meaning (Serey, 1992).

The film presents old and new ideologies, obedience and resistance and the one between being realistic and being romantic, as alternative interpretations of the educational dilemma. Keating's pursuit of freedom and opposition to traditional cognitive orientations have contributed to the student's self-awakening and projected the stranglehold of traditional education on the student's nature (Rossouw, 2010). These conflicts which run through the film are the essence of understanding the film, behind which is a reconsideration of the cultural theme of a national archetype, namely, the American dream (Vannini, 2006).

Previous studies on *Dead Poets Society* mainly concern the development of teacher Keating's innovative pedagogies and comparisons. From the beginning of the 21st century, the research on the conflict between the unique and traditional teaching method (Guo, 2008), and the conflict between the idealistic and realistic in the film (Duan, 2011) began to flourish gradually. In light of these flourishing researches on the conflicts in *Dead Poets Society*, though not systematic and comprehensive, the value of exploring multiple conflicts has emerged.

This paper is designed to make a systematic analysis of multiple conflicts based on the previous research results, and gives a deeper insight into multiple conflicts, hence promoting the overall study of the film. It also aims at exploring the inspiration for contemporary educational reform and inspiring people in adversity to adhere to their dreams through the analysis of multiple conflicts.

### CONTENT

The main line of the movie revolves around multiple conflicts, which can be classified as conflicts between

old and new ideologies, obedience and resistance, and being romantic and realistic. It is these conflicts that have intrigued readers' interest and cause them to reflect. In consequence, it is of vital significance to analyze these conflicts, namely conflicts between old and new ideologies, between the old and new ideologies, obedience and resistance, and being romantic and being realistic.

In the Wilton aristocratic school with "traditional, discipline, honor, and excellence" as the school motto, students have been educated to obey traditional rules and authority, and submissively accept traditional ideologies restricted by the school and their parents. The new English teacher Keating, a man of innovation, seems incompatible with the overall atmosphere of the school. Apparently, it is essential to explore the conflict between the old and new ideologies.

Conflicts over pedagogy in *Dead Poets Society* are widely discussed, generally by pedagogical teachers guiding their students to critique educational reality, reflect on educational ideas, and explore educational theory. Roughly speaking, the pedagogical conflict seems to be summed up in two forces: a force for change, represented by the Keating teachers, and a schooling of traditional education, represented by McAllister.

Wilton College overemphasizes 'tradition' to reinforce its orthodox as an authoritative school." 'Tradition, honor, glory, discipline, excellence' are the dogmas that the students of this school must bear in mind, and hopelessly, they interpret them as 'vile, horrible, decadent, excremental' and the famous Welton is 'Hell-ton'. According to the principal, "More than 75 percent of the graduates go on to the Ivy League universities in the United States, an achievement based solely on adherence to the traditional tenets that make the school the best preparatory school. Mr. McAllister is a traditionalist who sticks to his rote, cumbersome teaching. When Mr. Keating encourages the students to tear down a chapter of Measure Poetry that he deems would restrain their imagination and creativity, Mr. McAllister rushes into the classroom to stop and criticize them. He believes that these students will never become artists, but bankers or doctors, and what Mr. Keating is doing is misleading them. He abhors any unorthodox ideas, rejects any unorthodox ideas, and looks for change in his students, defiantly and exasperatedly.

However, Keating sees the harm that orthodox education can do to students. He has turned a light on his students with innovative teaching methods. His educational philosophy is to foster independence and independent thinking in his students. (Guo, 2008) Keating begins teaching in Latin *Carpe Diem*, representing himself as the student's leading helmsman (captain, my captain) to implement his teaching philosophy, influencing students and infusing them with the 'monotonous and quiet life of youth, passion, dreams and confidence. In the first lesson,

Keating goes against the grain. He blows Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture into the classroom. Such pedagogy does not take place in the classroom as usual. When students go to the History Building to see photos of past graduating classes, he asks them to listen attentively to the voices of those who have died - *Carpe Diem*, seize the day, make your life extraordinary, and guide students to the true meaning of life in this vivid and novel way."

The difference between Mr. McAllister's traditional teaching and Mr. Keating's unorthodox teaching has its roots in the different expectations they have for their students. Mr. McAllister, a man of realism and utilitarianism, nips unrealistic dreams in the bud, advocating that students pursue lucrative and decent careers. However, Keating encourages students to be free thinkers, leaving out words and language and pursuing passion. In his view, the student has the right to unleash his potential and nature, so it is his duty to materialize it. According to Mr. Keating, the essence of education does not lie in the degree of education, nor in the mastery of skills and tools, but in the ability to sublimate the spirit and humanity, and to be less worldly and utilitarian.

In the film, Teacher Keating not only provides his students with unorthodox pedagogies but also wakes their true nature : resistance. Simultaneously, however, conflict between Obedience and Resistance has emerged. Therefore, to fully understand how the students achieve their dreams, this conflict cannot afford being ignored. Neil enters Wilton Prep Academy with an A grade and is recognized as an outstanding student throughout the school. He is handsome, forgiving, passionate, idealistic, perceptive and charismatic. He loves to act and gives a great performance. If he follows such a life trajectory, he will follow the path set in advance by his father and enter the best medical school with no doubt and will become an excellent doctor after graduation. Keating's guidance, however, makes Neil more aware that he has been living in the shadow of his father. Later, he wishes to begin the journey to the meaning of life. Nonetheless, he is afraid to tell his father that he has participated in his favorite stage play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which he plays the heroin. Throughout the film, he is the supreme student Keating expects. However, from the father's point of view, Neil's performance is "unprofessional," so he certainly does not receive encouragement and praise from his father. Instead, the father erodes Neil's passions and dreams over and over again, and Neil always resists his father's authority in a forceful and implicit way. (Ci, 2017) When Neil's father asks him to quit his job at the school magazine, Neil's eyes are filled with helplessness and perseverance, but his response to his father is, "I'm sorry. You know me, I've always been too greedy." When he is excited about the actor's public interview in *Dreams*, Todd reminds him of the irresistible reality: his father's disapproval, and Neil heartily murmurs, "Don't tell him,

at least I'm not denying him. I amuse myself mentally. Could it be that it won't work for a while?" When Keating asks about the results of Neil's communication with his father, Neil flashes his words and comforts himself with a lie: "He would 'have' agreed to continue performing with me." When Neil has finished the show without a hitch, his father stands behind him. No doubt he reprimands him severely and decided to transfer him to the military academy to study medicine. He will live his life away from the shows he loves. Neil does not get into a heated argument with his father, sitting on the sofa with despair in his eyes as he mutters. "I act very well. I really do a good job." Neil wore the flower crown for the last time and ended his life in despair.

Neil's final rebellion is also in his usual way: to defend his dreams and his life, he leaves the world in silence. The fierce conflict between forbearance and resistance brings about an inner breakdown. Perhaps death, in his view, is the highest form of defiance, but he goes decisively in such a heartbreaking way.

Romanticism generally emphasizes the imagination and emotional factors of literature, focusing on vivid description, sensory experience and description of supernatural power. The outstanding feature of American romantic literature is to emphasize the pursuit of individual freedom and ideal. Keating, the man of romantic, squarely faces the pressure from the world and encourages students to pursue freedom. As such, it is of vital importance to explore the conflict between romantic and realistic in the film in order to appreciate its impressive beauty. The romanticism of education stands for the supremacy of individual happiness and freedom, so they oppose the view that education is to prepare people for their place in the economy and society, and that education is regarded as a socio-political goal to promote external and personal development. It advocates that personal education must adapt to the true self of the individual, and emphasizes the importance of self-expression and self-realization.

Another form of liberal education emphasizes that students enjoy absolute freedom in the teaching process. What students learn, how to learn, and who manages are determined by the students themselves. The purpose of education is to make everyone realize their existence and form a Set a unique lifestyle different from others, maintain personal freedom, help individuals make their own choices, and take responsibility for their choices. Educational realism is actually a utilitarian idea. It advocates that educational activities are only individuals' passive response to the environment. The standard for measuring education is to realize value and create value. What education should do is to prepare students for the future career and fulfill social needs, or human needs. For this reason, the development of education should take social development as its ultimate goal. In

the implementation of teaching, realism often adopts the strict discipline view of the education order and the result-oriented view. It is also reflected in its rationalism of educational purposes and objective reality of teaching content. The pursuit of sexuality and the uniformity of teaching methods emphasize the use of ethics as the general purpose of education and emphasize that students are in a quiet and passive position in the teaching process (Duan, 2011).

The realistic representatives in the film are Wilton Preparatory School and parents. Wilton is considered a school with excellent tradition and glory. It trains students with strict rules and makes them the best talents in colleges and universities, but it is actually a suffocating high school. Stereotyped teacher, strict discipline and regulations, boring and boring lessons, students are like marionettes, only obedience, personality and thought are ruthlessly restrained and restrained; as the head of a school Nolan, his school guidelines are Tradition and discipline, these rules made him authoritarian, using authority to agree on all aspects of the student, limiting any free thinking. At the opening ceremony of the film, the students recite the school motto "tradition, honor, discipline, and excellence", but in private use "rhyme" rhetoric to change For "mocking, terror, decadence, excretion" to vent the dissatisfaction in my heart.

Another group of realists are Jackie Chan's parents who spend huge sums of money to send their children to Wilton, hoping that the children will enter this prestigious university in the United States to study medicine, law, business, and engineering through this school. Salary or outstanding professional, from now on to live a rich and prominent happy life. The most typical representative is Neil's father, who ignores his son's interests and feelings and arranges everything for his son according to his wishes. The arrival of the romanticist Keating is a spring breeze to the school and students. He takes the students to listen to the sound of death in the school history building and reflect on the meaning of life. He asks the students to draw the essence of life and seize life every day; He asked students to tear away the knowledge of dogma in textbooks, and thus to shake off the dogmatic and rigid authority, and advocates the free thinking to appreciate the inner beauty of poetry; he encourages the boys to read their ideals on the green field and educate them Dare to pursue dreams; he inspires students to stand on the desks and overlook the world with a new perspective. (Duan, 2011) The children in the film are enlightened by this kind of thinking, which chimes with the their hearts, enabling them to ponder and pursue it. This can be exemplified by their changes: they bravely inquire about the path of life at the risk of violating the rigid control, re-establish the death poet's society, hit a festival song in the cave, read the poem aloud, tell a horror story and enjoy the naked girl painting together.

The romantic tragedy does end there. The school forced by parents and the public to investigate the cause of Neil's suicide, deeds of the death poets society coerces the students to sign and accuse Keating of abetting students to establish the "Death Poets Society", which misleads Neil and directly contributes to his death. Keating, the victim of the conflict between romantic and realistic, is expelled and loses his war. So does the romantic.

## CONCLUSION

*Dead Poets Society* is a masterpiece by Peter Weir. According to the current research statements of this film, only a few scholars pay attention to its multiple conflicts, while others tend to focus on its implications on education, literature or poetry. In this paper, with regard to the important role multiple conflicts play, three major conflicts are analyzed, including the conflict between old and new Ideologies, obedience and resistance as well as another one between being realistic and romantic. Through the analysis, this thesis demonstrates the significant roles of these conflicts and emphasizes their development as well as the reasons for their formation.

These three major conflicts which run through the film are the essence of understanding the film. The limitation of this paper is that it gives more weight to the reasons for their development and to their differing forms, while their influences receive less attention due to the limited space. For further research, if the influences in all aspects can be taken into consideration, the exploration about multiple conflicts in *Dead Poets Society* will be much more comprehensive and authoritative.

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