

**“WHAT WILL YOUR VERSE BE?": IDENTITY AND MASCULINITY IN
DEAD POETS SOCIETY**

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ABSTRACT. *Peter Weir's popular classic Dead Poets Society (1989) has been considered a movie dealing with masculinity, especially with the evolution of a group of teenage boys from boyhood to manhood, along with their quest for their identities. Both the masculine traits and the pursuit of the characters' voices are represented in the four sites analysed by Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumin in You Tarzan (1993). These four sites – the body, action, the external world and the internal world – are applied in this paper to Dead Poets Society, paying especial attention to the portrayal of masculinity and identity in the three main protagonists of the movie.*

Keywords: *Dead Poets Society, masculinity, identity, Kirkham and Thumin, film, Robin Williams.*

“¿CUÁL SERÁ TU VERSO?”: IDENTIDAD Y MASCULINIDAD EN *EL CLUB DE LOS POETAS MUERTOS*

RESUMEN. *El clásico popular El Club de los poetas muertos, dirigido por Peter Weir (1989), ha sido considerado una película sobre masculinidad, en particular sobre el paso de un grupo de adolescentes de la infancia a la edad adulta, y su búsqueda de identidades. Tanto los rasgos masculinos como esa búsqueda de las voces de los protagonistas están representados en los cuatro rasgos analizados por Pat Kirkham y Janet Thumin en You Tarzan (1993). Estos cuatro rasgos – el cuerpo, la acción, el mundo exterior y el mundo interior – se aplican en este artículo a El Club de los poetas muertos, prestando especial atención a la representación de la masculinidad y la identidad de los tres protagonistas principales de la película.*

Palabras clave: *El Club de los poetas muertos, masculinidad, identidad, Kirkham y Thumin, cine, Robin Williams.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

There has always been a taste in American cinema for movies dealing with manly desires and concerns and with the complex concept of masculinity. This is the case of such patriotic war movies such as Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) or *War Horse* (2011)¹ or of sport movies like Boaz Yakin's *Remember the Titans* (2000), which bring to the fore the importance of male bonding. In these films, female figures have little to no role at all, since the centre of the stage is reserved for manly figures that the audience (mostly men) are willing to identify with.

Although not dealing with such traditionally masculine topics as war or sports, *Dead Poets Society* (Peter Weir, 1989) could also be included in this category, given that it is concerned with male bonding within a group of young men who are engaged in a quest for identity. Regardless of some of its harshest reviews,² the movie was well-received by critics and audiences alike and, twenty-eight years later, it is still a popular classic. One of the reasons for this is undoubtedly the

¹ For a case study of the application of the four sites which are analysed in this paper to Steven Spielberg's *War Horse*, see Díaz-Cuesta (2014).

² Especially remarkable in this respect is Roger Ebert's 1989 review, in which he claimed that he was so moved at the end of the movie that "[he] wanted to throw up". <<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/dead-poets-society-1989>>.

fact that, as Mike Hammond understands it, the central concern of the movie has to do “with masculinity and in particular with rites of passage, male bonding and the relationships of older authority figures to adolescent males. The film sets out to show how boys become men” (1993: 55). Indeed, the main focus of the movie is on the quest for identity of the main male protagonists and on the search for their own voice, their ‘barbaric yawp’.

As a means to explore that pursuit, in this paper I will analyse the movie from the perspective of the four sites studied by Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumin in *You Tarzan* (1993): the body, action, the external world, and the internal world. These four sites represent complementary areas where “various traits of masculinity are signaled” (Kirkham and Thumin 1993: 11). Starting from the most obvious male representation, the body, and dealing with its related site, action, through to the external world, the internal world will be eventually reached, where the ultimate goal of the three main characters – Mr. Keating (Robin Williams), Neil Perry (Robert Sean Leonard) and Todd Anderson (Ethan Hawke) – is made more evident.

2. THE BODY

Kirkham and Thumin discuss the body in terms of its display, referring “to the visual representation of the male, [...] to the spectacle of the male body” (1993: 11). In *Dead Poets Society*, there is no explicit emphasis on naked, sexualized male bodies. In fact, the physical aspect of characters is never a key issue in the attraction they exert on others. Thus, the character that mostly attracts the audience’s attention is John Keating (performed by Robin Williams), in spite of his not being the main protagonist of the movie.³ Although the first shots of the movie are meant for the students rather than for Keating, when he makes his silent first appearance in the fourth minute of the film, all gazes are turned towards him. This centrality of Keating within the movie is further highlighted by the fact that the first name that appears in the list of credits is that of Robin Williams, followed by the ensemble of actors playing the students. In this regard, Hammond argues that “John Keating, through Robin William’s performance, is offered as object of desire and identification” (1993: 61). This idea is especially present in Keating’s lectures, where his position of power is made clear both when he stands on top of his desk, forcing the students – and, therefore, the audience – to look up to him, to

³ In his 1989 review for *The New York Times*, Vincent Canby argues that one of the problems of the movie is precisely that the character of John Keating does not play a more significant role: “although John Keating is the most vivid, most complex character in it, he is not around long enough”. <<http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=950DE0DE1F31F931A35755C0A96F948260&mcubz=1>>.

observe him from an inferior position, and when he bends down and instigates them to huddle around him, remaining once again in a position of admiration.

Kirkham and Thumin “also refer to the actor’s presence, his star persona, as an important element of this material construction” (1993: 11). It is worth mentioning here the casting choice of Robin Williams for the portrayal of John Keating. Williams was first and foremost a comedian – he spent much of his career doing stand-up comedy –, although the variety of genres and characters he explored is outstanding. Since *Good Morning, Vietnam* in 1987, he started to star in drama movies, including *Good Will Hunting* (1997), which granted him his Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor.⁴ Critics in general praised his performance as Professor Keating in *Dead Poets Society* (he received an Academy Award nomination for it), although William’s ‘star persona’ was ever-present. Roger Ebert claimed along these lines that “Williams does a good job of playing an intelligent, quick-witted, well-read young man. But then there are scenes in which his stage persona punctures the character – as when he does impressions of Marlon Brando and John Wayne doing Shakespeare”^{5,6}

Laura Mulvey also refers to this idea in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, in which she analyses the male figure starring in a film as someone the spectator can identify with:

As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence. A male movie star’s glamorous characteristics are thus not those of the erotic object of the gaze, but those of the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego conceived in the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror. (1989: 20)

Williams’ attractiveness in the movie does not come from his physically ‘glamorous characteristics’ but rather from his touching, inspiring qualities as he

⁴ In fact, the part of the psychologist that Williams portrays in *Good Will Hunting* bears much resemblance with the character of John Keating in their roles as paternal and mentor figures for the protagonists.

⁵ <<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/dead-poets-society-1989>>.

⁶ It is worth mentioning here that the movie was adapted for the stage in 2016, starring Jason Sudeikis as Professor Keating. Sudeikis also has a career composed mainly of comedies, including his role in *Saturday Night Live* as actor and writer from 2003 to 2013. Once again, Mr. Keating was played by a comedian. In his review for *The Guardian*, Alexis Soloski qualifies Sudeikis’s Keating as “playful, serious-minded and immensely sympathetic”, which could also be applied to Williams’ performance in the movie. Perhaps the sympathy Soloski is alluding to comes from the choice of a well-known comedian to play this dramatic role, leaving him out of his comfort zone. <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/nov/17/dead-poets-society-review-jason-sudeikis>>.

portrays Keating. The spectator identifies not with Williams' persona as physically good-looking (as it may be the case with other actors in other movies) but with Keating himself, with Williams' stage persona as a comedian playing the role of the lovable English teacher, with the inspiration everyone would ultimately want to encourage in their self-reflection in the mirror. In his review for the *Daily News*, Hank Gallo claimed that “[t]here is a warmth [Williams] projects that seems so real that you, like boys, would gladly follow him anywhere.” This is precisely Williams' (and the movie's) achievement – the fact that the audience is encouraged by Keating's philosophy and willing to put it into practice.

Whereas Robin Williams was a well-known actor by the time *Dead Poets Society* was released, the actors playing the protagonists of the movie were not. Ethan Hawke, playing Todd Anderson, had only featured in two films before 1989, although the acclamation of critic and public alike granted him his subsequent world-wide success.⁷ The same could be said of Robert Sean Leonard (Neil Perry), who had a couple of years of experience in theatre but was not a recognizable face yet.⁸ However, despite Hawke's and Leonard's almost anonymity, critics praised them for their performance in the movie: “As for the boys, they are all wonderful. [...] Ethan Hawke and Robert Sean Leonard are particular standout.” (Gallo)

Continuing with the analysis of the body in the movie, there are two other male characters that deserve special attention. According to Kirkham and Thumin, the representation of the body may reflect two contradictory issues, namely vulnerability and dominance (1993: 12). In the case of *Dead Poets Society*, this contradiction in the representation of the body is personified in two different characters, Neil Perry and Charles Danton, respectively. Neil's body is presented as a site of vulnerability; in fact, the most vulnerable moment of the whole film is found when Neil is considering suicide after his father's ultimatum and final decision regarding Neil's future. Pure Romanticism is found in Neil's reaction, starting with his taking off his clothes and facing the world as the Romantic figure he is: confronting the dark, snowy and foggy night half naked, with Puck's crown of thorns. This is his way of showing himself to the world, of revealing his truest self, his chance to take the reins of his own life for the first time and to be in control of his choices, even though the only way out he can find is suicide.

The other aspect related to the body Kirkham and Thumin refer to is virility, or dominance. In *Dead Poets Society*, this is represented in the character of Charles

⁷ Hawke has starred in more than two movies a year since then, among which the *Before* trilogy (Richard Linklater 1995, 2004, 2013) should be pointed out.

⁸ After *Dead Poets Society*, Leonard's most famous role came with *Dr. House*, the TV show where he played Dr. James Wilson during the eight seasons of the drama.

Danton, especially when he draws a red lightning bolt in his chest as a symbol of masculinity: “It’s an Indian warrior symbol for virility. Makes me feel potent. Like I can drive girls crazy”. I personally understand Charles Danton (a.k.a. Nuwanda) as the most ‘physical’ of the characters, the one playing violently and the one, along with Knox, overtly interested in sexuality. As a matter of fact, sexuality seems to have its importance in the movie as well. Mr. Keating claims that language was invented “to woo women”, and that is apparently Charlie’s prime aim in using poetry, as shown in the fact that he takes girls to their secret cave and recites classical poetry to them as if he were the poet, with one intention only.⁹

3. ACTION

The body and action are two sites that are closely linked, since action is also related to the physical. As Kirkham and Thumin put it, these displays of the physical include “violence, competition, aggression, skill, and endurance, in which these attributes are depicted in terms of the male body in action” (1993: 12). In *Dead Poets Society*, all these manifestations can be found, one way or another.

As suggested in the previous section, Charles Danton is one of the most violent characters in the movie, as appreciated in one of the scenes after Neil’s suicide, when he attacks Cameron for his betrayal. Cameron has denounced Mr. Keating to the headmaster as responsible for Neil’s death, and therefore he is considered a traitor to their group, having betrayed the sense of loyalty to that family (after all, they are a society of their own). Several characters have to grab Charles so that he does not turn against Cameron, although he ends up assaulting him anyway. Thus, this is one of those scenes in which the division between romantics and realists, which will be analyzed in the section related to the external world, can be appreciated.

Action, according to Kirkham and Thumin, also relates to competition and endurance. As will be taken up again when dealing with the external world, every character seems to be competing against reality one way or another. In terms of masculinity, Knox could also be understood as competing against Chet to win Chris’ attention. Here, another aspect of paramount relevance to masculinities is present, the competition between two men to earn the love of the woman.¹⁰ Chet’s reaction when Knox kisses a sleeping Chris is a violent one, for he immediately

⁹ Knox also applies the philosophy of the *carpe diem* to sexuality, understanding Keating’s urging to seize the day as his encouragement to get the girl, whatever it takes.

¹⁰ The motif of the love triangle is quite present in romantic comedies, for instance *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (Sharon Maguire, 2001) or *Shakespeare in Love* (John Madden, 1998) among others, and also in some action movies such as *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008) or *Pearl Harbor* (Michael Bay, 2001).

turns to Knox and starts attacking him, defending thus his virility and manhood, reflected in the possession of the woman. The original script by Tom Schulman, however, depicts a much more aggressive and sensual scene in which Knox is a witness of Chris and Chet kissing fiercely when "Knox's hand reaches out and begins to ever so lightly stroke the nape of Chris' neck down toward her breast. [...] Knox moves his hand up and down her, sensuously."¹¹ Hence, the role of the woman is subdued and reduced to the cause of conflict between two men, to the object or prize these two male characters are fighting for.

In the end, not only Knox, who gets the girl, but also the rest of the characters win their personal wars – understanding Neil as a winner in the sense that he gets control of his life, even though that control inevitably implies his own death. In fact, Kirkham and Thumin explain the character of Neil as someone "who is torn between two sets of values, both expressed as demands. But when this young man comes to act independently it is not the act of the successful man but that which his society judges a failure, namely suicide" (1993: 16). Even if the audience views Neil's suicide as a sign of an unhappy ending, it represents Neil finding his true voice and his identity as a romantic. Besides, his decision triggers another reaction, an awakening in Todd, as will be explored in the last section.

Finally, this site was also understood by Kirkham and Thumin as representing skill. The three main characters of the movie present their talent in different ways, but all of them are at some point objects of the gaze of an audience, whether a class or a crowded theatre, which also relates to the body. It has already been discussed the way in which Mr. Keating's conveying of his passion, namely literature and its power, turns him into the bullseye of admiration. Todd also manifests a certain literary talent, portrayed in the poem he composes for Keating's class and which will be analysed in the last section of this paper. In the case of Neil, his passion and talent are clearly represented in his acting, which drives his life and consequently results in his death. These three characters present an artistic talent that the realists are unable to comprehend, therefore broadening the gap between romantics and realists that will be crucial for the denouement of the film.

Notwithstanding, I believe the most important scene regarding action has to do with taking action, with taking a step forward (also literally) against conformism, against injustice, against reality even. This scene is, of course, the most famous scene of the whole film, the "O Captain My Captain" scene.¹² The homonymous

¹¹ Nonetheless, the script was modified until the version we find in the movie, and in fact the character of Knox would have been understood completely different if this version of the scene had remained. <<http://readwatchwrite.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Dead-Poets-Society.pdf>>.

¹² In an article following Williams' death, Jessica Goodman argues that this scene of the movie inspired a generation, honoring Williams both "as a fictional teacher and a metaphorical one to the young actors

poem by Walt Whitman is dedicated to the assassination of Abraham Lincoln in 1865, who is identified in the poem with the captain of the ship (i.e. the US). From the beginning of the movie, Keating has instigated his students to identify him with the captain of the ship, adding to the admiration we were alluding to in terms of the body. In this scene, the students finally take action, preferring to stay by their captain's side, rather than accepting that they are actually standing on a sinking ship. The battle between romantics and realists is made completely clear in this final scene, in terms as well of the position of the characters – some standing on their desks, face up, versus those who remain seated, unable to look up. Furthermore, we see Mr. Keating from a high-angle shot, from the perspective of the students, of the Romantics, in an idealized position that does not correspond to the realist view of Mr. Nolan or the rest of the class, whose heads facing down mark the rejection of Keating's figure. Thus, the audience is linked to the Romantics in the perspective that has prevailed throughout the whole movie.

4. THE EXTERNAL WORLD

Kirkham and Thumin understand the external world as the representation of “the public interaction of male characters with each other and with the conventions and institutions against which they operate” (1993: 12). Thus, I have divided this section in three sub-sections, corresponding, respectively, to the students' relationship with Mr. Keating, with each other, and with authority.

The students' relationship with Mr. Keating is probably the most important relationship of all. Kirkham and Thumin argue that Keating proposes “a ‘decent’ (though by no means radical) masculinity as an alternative to [...] the cold and ruthless élitism of the upper middle class in its maintenance of social hierarchies” (1993: 21). What Keating is praising in the film is not only critical thinking but also the breakdown of an establishment that is no longer working. In this sense, Keating is setting the students free from the strings that restrain them. He shows them to the world of poetry, of literature, of living.¹³ Hence, the students look up to their teacher as their leader and role model. After all, they follow Keating's figure as the founder of the Dead Poets Society, Neil turns to him when he needs help to confront reality (his father)¹⁴ and even Charles/Nuwanda acts fearlessly

in the movie”. In fact, the vast majority of images used when Williams died came from *Dead Poets Society* and this scene in particular, showing its power both within the movie and outside of it.

¹³ As I will discuss in the next section, he is the one who takes the blind out of their eyes and shows them the necessity to look for their own selves.

¹⁴ Kirkham and Thumin also discuss in this regard that “Freudian notions of absent father and ‘ideal’ substitute father are self-consciously invoked in the case of *Dead Poets Society*” (1993: 21). Along these lines, José Díaz-Cuesta (2010) studied the importance of the paternal figure and its connection to

believing that Keating is going to be pleased. In a way, they are imitating him, they want to be like him – as Nolan warns Keating, “boys [that] age are very impressionable”, and they probably see in Mr. Keating the best role model to follow, for the rest of authorial figures are full of rules and impediments, whereas Mr. Keating allows them to be free. Keating’s peculiar position sets him always in between authority and rebellion, “between the elderly tutors and the boys, since he is both teacher and [former] student” (Hammond 1993: 57), allowing thus the special relationship he maintains with the students, their closeness to him, and their admiration towards his figure.¹⁵

Hence, the students even worship him, linking here the metaphor of the Captain of the ship to a possible understanding of Keating as a God figure. In this regard, Baker and See view Mr. Keating as a Christ-like figure or martyr, in the sense that he gives up teaching (his ultimate passion) for the benefit of his students, to “promote his ‘religion’”. As will be seen, Keating is not the only martyr in the movie, though.

Another important bond is that of the students with themselves, as members of a community, the society in the title of the movie. They act as a group in most cases: they all support Neil in his struggle against his father for the pursuit of his dream, they all accept Todd’s shyness and decision to attend the meetings as a listener but not a reader, and they all turn against Cameron when he betrays Mr. Keating. In fact, the sense of group can also be appreciated when they all sign the document against Mr. Keating, albeit against their own will. However, I believe Neil’s suicide ends up dividing them instead of making them stronger, for it opens the gap between the pure romantics that blame Mr. Perry (Charlie, Knox, Todd) and those who prefer to remain realists and blame Mr. Keating (Cameron).

As a matter of fact, the students’ relationship with authority, especially with Mr. Perry and Mr. Nolan, is that of rebellion. Here is where that distinction between Romanticism and Realism as two opposed views of life can be more clearly found. The students, led by Mr. Keating, are the romantics, those inspired by nineteenth-century poetry, who want to “suck all the marrow of life” (Thoreau), those who

masculinity in a corpus of movies directed by Steven Spielberg, including *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), *Hook* (1991), also starring Robin Williams, or *Jurassic Park* (1993), among others. These films, as it is the case in *Dead Poets Society*, emphasize the close relationship between fatherhood and masculinity, especially the absent father and the paternal figure that must take his place (Diaz-Cuesta 328-9).

¹⁵ It is precisely this admiration that leads Kevin J. H. Dettmar to point out that at the end of the movie the students have not found their true voice, but rather they have adopted Keating’s: “Even when the students reprise this desktop posture at the film’s close, in a gesture of schoolboy disobedience (or perhaps obedience to Keating), we realize that while the boys are marching to the beat of a different drum, it’s Keating’s drum. Or they’re dancing to his pipes.” <<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/02/-em-dead-poets-society-em-is-a-terrible-defense-of-the-humanities/283853/>>.

“may contribute a verse” (Whitman). The realists, on the other hand, are more pragmatic and represented by Mr. Perry and Mr. Nolan. Their view of life is more practical and less figurative. One of the many examples of this distinction is a conversation between Mr. Keating and Mr. Nolan regarding their teaching methods. Keating is trying to teach his students to think for themselves, instead of falling into group-thinking. Mr. Nolan, on the other hand, goes for the practical option and considers that they have to prepare the students for college instead of for life, following the school’s mottoes of tradition and discipline. Consequently, Mr. Nolan applies Dr. J. Evans Pritchard’s mathematical formula to comprehend poetry and calculate the greatness of a particular poem, whereas Mr. Keating instructs his students to rip out the whole preface, instigating critical thinking.

Moreover, this battle between Romantics and Realists is also seen in the competition of some characters against reality, especially Neil’s. His struggle is reflected in the quarrel with his father, in his personal battle to be the hero of his own life. This is a fight between dreams and reality, between his daydreams of becoming an actor and his father’s down-to-earth plans for his son to become a doctor. Besides, Todd also fights against reality, against his family’s expectations of him. Unlike Neil, he is insecure about his own self and he will try to find his identity throughout the movie, as will be discussed in the next section.

5. THE INTERNAL WORLD

Everything I have been mentioning regarding the preceding three sites has been anticipating the idea of identity, the characters’ identities both as members of a group and as individuals. I consider the internal world, therefore, as the most important site represented in the movie, understanding it as a story about the characters’ quest for identity. In this quest for their own selves, Mr. Keating plays the role of the ‘spiritual guide’, of the leader whom they follow blindly. His guiding method is mainly poetry, understood as “what we stay alive for”; in other words, what we essentially are and what distinguishes us from other living beings. Keating, following Walt Whitman (who watches over the class), instigates them to find their “barbaric yawp”, their own voice. Keating’s mission is to implement critical thinking in their minds, to help them find their own path. This is made clear in the walking scene in the courtyard, when he tries to teach them to swim upstream, to go for individuality and against conformism. This implies looking at the world from a different perspective, from different angles, instead of remaining in our chosen paths, with the blinkers on.

The characters’ quest for identity, nonetheless, inevitably implies their evolution from boyhood to manhood, and therefore they are also seeking their masculinity

in the process. Kirkham and Thumin also discuss the “anxiety about gender identity” in terms of the internal world (1993: 23), the necessity of men to prove “themselves not only by taking risks but also by taking more risks than anyone else and thus being more ‘manly’, in a perverse and destructive extension of the competitive ideal. These are men who cannot say no to a challenge, cannot walk away from a dare” (1993: 23). Thus, we could argue that the students, through their rebellion against authority, are trying to prove their virility and masculinity, their fearless uprising represented in the resumption of the Dead Poets Society. Their bravery is ultimately proved with the final scene of the movie, when they face Mr. Nolan and defend Mr. Keating. Notwithstanding, one could argue this defense comes rather late, taking into account they all have signed a declaration holding Keating responsible for Neil’s death. The other side of the coin shows Mr. Keating precisely not taking arms against injustice but rather accepting his fate silently, allowing thus this two-fold approach to the close relationship between competition and masculinity.

As it was suggested in the first section, the real protagonist of the film is not Mr. Keating, but Neil and/or Todd. Neil Perry is the romantic figure by excellence – he is moved by passion, fights against his destiny, what has been imposed upon him, and ends up committing suicide. Needless to say, his passion is acting. He lies to his parents and Mr. Nolan in order to chase his dream, which would enable him to become someone different, away from the reality he is stuck in. In this case, Neil is not a marginal figure, as a proper Romantic would, but had he succeeded in his pursuit, he would have been left out of his family, who did not approve of his desires.

The difference between Neil and Todd is that the former remains a Romantic, in the sense that he was a Romantic from the beginning of the movie, although he had not started acting like one just yet. Todd, on the other hand, is the only dynamic character of the whole movie (Baker and See). At the beginning of the story he has to live up to his family’s expectations, reaching the model of his brother, but he ends up rejecting his family’s views and therefore evolving once that he finds his truest self. This is done through poetry, especially through the poem he composes for Keating’s class. His verse is the only instance of his real identity that the audience gets, mainly his fears and passions:

I close my eyes and this image floats beside me / The sweaty-toothed madman
with a stare that pounds my brains / His hands reach out and choke me And all
the time he’s mumbling / Truth, like a blanket that always leaves your feet cold.
You push it, stretch it, it will never be enough / Kick it, beat it, it will never cover
any of us. From the moment we enter crying, to the moment we leave dying, / it
will just cover your face / as you wail and cry and scream.

Baker and See suggest that the poem is about Todd's struggle between passion and realism (Romanticism versus Realism once again). These authors identify the blanket with passion, but I personally understand the "sweaty-toothed madman" choking the poet as a representation of reality, of the expectations that are built upon him. It does not matter what he does, it will never be enough – and this could be applied to Neil as well.

Thus, this is the beginning of Todd's evolution, which ends up being completely clear at the end of the movie, when he is able to express his own mind standing by Keating against Nolan. This way, Neil's suicide ends up being the trigger of Todd's awakening, in other words, "[Neil's] sacrifice allows Todd to find his 'voice'; his barbaric yawp is 'Neil' (Hammond 1993: 63). Neil is acting thus as another Christ-like figure, and thus Puck's crown of thorns turns into a powerful symbol of his sacrifice, of the martyr he has become to the benefit of the rest of his community.

Although the movie does not explore this issue in more depth, one could argue that there are some hints at a homosexual relationship between Neil and Todd (clearly the most affected character by Neil's death), given the latter's admiration and respect towards the former. Along the same train of thought, Hammond also suggests that "Neil's relationship with Todd results, through Neil's death, in Todd's successful entrance into manhood" (1993: 61). In fact, he is the first character with some kind of regret for the situation, the first one to defend their teacher. By the end of the movie, he has finally got involved and spoken up, in contrast with his shyness and his not wanting to read in public at the beginning of the movie. Besides, he is also the only character to openly claim that it was Mr. Perry who killed Neil, for he does not believe his best friend capable of leaving them alone. Therefore, Todd personifies an evolution from insecurity to identity – he thought himself to be merely expectations from his family, but ends up having his own voice.

6. CONCLUSION

Dead Poets Society is a movie primarily about the characters' evolution from boyhood to manhood, implying their finding their truest selves along the way. Hammond argues that "the film itself disguises the fundamental issue of masculinity through its emphasis on poetry and great (male) literary figures, whilst also dealing with the cathartic and uplifting experience of self-realization" (54). In a way, the role of poetry is merely an excuse for Mr. Keating to show his students the main purpose of life, the necessity to find their own voice rather than singing the songs from others. Along the same lines, Ebert claims that

“Keating is more of a plot device than a human being”,¹⁶ alluding to his little development and role as a guide, as establishing the balance between Realism and Romanticism.

The development of the characters and Mr. Keating's role in it are portrayed in different ways in the four sites explored by Kirkham and Thumin, as analysed in this paper. Indeed, the body, action, the internal world, and the external world all have to do with finding the characters' truest personality. Mr. Keating's most valuable gift to his students is that he frees them from oppression and expectation, allowing them to express their own voice. Todd Anderson is the only character who undergoes a change at the end of the movie, the one who really finds who he is and who he wants to become. Although the movie ends in a pessimistic tone (all the characters are wretched), we can still find some hope, for some of the characters will not come to die discovering they have not lived.

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