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Finding Balance

Poetry from the mid sixteenth century through the late eighteenth century went through several changes that took literature from one extreme to another. *Dead Poets Society* is a movie that mimics some of those changes as it examines the struggle that takes place between the two extremes. Director Peter Weir exposed his audiences to the severe tradition and order of Welton Academy, a boy's prep school, and contrasted it to the romanticized free thinking ways of their English teacher Mr. Keating. While the film demonstrated two different extremes the theme of the movie was that of finding a balance between the two.

From the onset, we are introduced to a setting that is religious in feeling, with its cathedral style auditorium, and pastoral type procession. The school gives the impression of being like a monastery, where these boys submit to tradition and discipline learning to control their passions and personal desires. This rigid and structured environment in which this school functions is to produce the types of young men that are disciplined and have a conformist mentality.

In contrast, Mr. Keating moves his English students to a love of poetry and learning that rises above their structured and controlled scholarly life. Through his declarations to seize the day, "Carpe Deum," and quoting authors such as Walter Whitman; he relates an overall purpose of making the most of life and learning - to think for yourself. He teaches his students that learning is more than structure and memorization; it is a profound and deeper understanding of life and self. Unlike the school, Keating uses his authority to act as a guide not an absolute power.

The disparity between Mr. Keating's classroom and the school itself are similar to the differences between the Romantic and Neoclassic ideals of the poets that these boys studied. The characters of Neil, Knox and "Nwanda" each take romanticism to the extreme, in almost a reckless abandonment of the structured neoclassic ideals. Cameron is more comfortable with doing what he is told and never really understands the concept of free thought; this makes him a character that represents the neoclassic ways of the school.

Todd seems to be the one character that finds a middle ground between the two, a balance. His emotions are based in feeling and free thinking, romanticism; but he also has a sense of reality. Through the course of the movie Todd goes from a timid young man that can hardly express himself to a person that is better able to convey his thoughts and feelings.

While Mr. Keating represented the extreme of romanticism, he also taught the boys to recognize the importance of finding a wise balance as he corrected them after learning of their antics. As the Movie portrays, the ideas of Romanticism and Neoclassicism each had their strong traits and together each offered a more balanced perspective of the life in which their poets wrote.