Dead Poet's Society Week Long Lesson Plan

USING THE FILM "THE DEAD POET'S SOCIETY" AS THE BASIS FOR TEACHING THE POETRY COURSE IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

Read the following quote and discuss the question below:

"We don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. And medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for."

- Dead Poet's Society

GROUP DISCUSSION – What does this really mean and why is it relevant to our way of life and how we approach our view of the world?
Read the following poems and discuss the questions below each:

“My Papa's Waltz” - by Theodore Roethke - deals with the emotional, sometimes violent, elements in a relationship between a parent and a child.

My Papa's Waltz

BY THEODORE ROETHKE
The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;
My mother's countenance
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.

2) "Walking Away" - by C. Day Lewis - deals with a son leaving home and the separation from his parent.

WALKING AWAY
It is eighteen years ago, almost to the day –
A sunny day with leaves just turning,
The touch-lines new-rulled – since I watched you play
Your first game of football, then, like a satellite
Wrenched from its orbit, go drifting away

Behind a scatter of boys. I can see
You walking away from me towards the school
With the pathos of a half-fledged thing set free
Into a wilderness, the gait of one
Who finds no path where the path should be.
That hesitant figure, eddying away
Like a winged seed loosened from its parent stem,
Has something I never quite grasp to convey
About nature’s give-and-take – the small, the scorching
Ordeals which fire one’s irresolute clay.

I have had worse partings, but none that so
Gnaws at my mind still. Perhaps it is roughly
Saying what God alone could perfectly show –
How selfhood begins with a walking away,
And love is proved in the letting go.

3) "Musee des Beaux Arts" - by W.H. Auden - the relevancy here could be around the figure of Icarus, i.e., trying to go beyond one’s reach - did Keating ask his pupils to reach too far?

Musee des Beaux Arts
W. H. Auden
About suffering they were never wrong,
The old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position: how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer’s horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.
In Breughel’s Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.
DISCUSSION AFTER READING THE POEMS ABOVE, THEN AGAIN AFTER WATCHING THE FILM.

HAVE A GROUP DISCUSSION ABOUT EACH OF THE TOPICS BELOW BEFORE VIEWING THE FILM, THEN AGAIN AFTER VIEWING THE FILM. SEE IF ATTITUDES OR OPINIONS CHANGE AND DISCUSS.

Jot down thoughts, notes, discussion on your own paper for each of these.

1) There are two approaches to education presented in the film - the strict, disciplined structure as opposed to a freer carpe diem attitude. WHICH do you think would be a more effective means of instruction and learning? Why?

2) A second theme found in the film deals with the relationship between a teacher and a pupil and how close and informal such a relationship should be. WHAT is your opinion on this subject? What is the line between student/teacher relationships? What are the dangers between getting too informal, or being too formal? How do teachers/students maintain balance?

3) A third area of discussion is the relationship between parents and children. What kind of involvement is positive and helpful and which is negative and destructive? How do students learn to cope and deal with stricter rules? What are alternatives to allowing relationships to become destructive?
Read the following poems AGAIN before watching the FILM.
FOR EACH POEM, WRITE DOWN THE FOLLOWING:

What is the main idea of the excerpt or passage?
How does it represent the concept of Carpe Diem (if at all)?
What metaphors, symbols, or imagery stand out?
Define any vocabulary (denotations/connotations) necessary to understanding the meaning of the poem.
Write down any historical allusions, research and discuss.

POETRY FROM THE FILM

**********
O Captain! My Captain!
- Walt Whitman
1
O CAPTAIN! my Captain! our fearful trip is done;
The ship has weather’d every rack, the prize we sought is won;
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring:
But O heart! heart! heart!
O the bleeding drops of red,
Where on the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.
2
O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;
Rise up--for you the flag is flung--for you the bugle trills;
For you bouquets and ribbon’d wreaths--for you the shores a-crowding;
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;
Here Captain! dear father!
This arm beneath your head;
It is some dream that on the deck,
You’ve fallen cold and dead.
3
My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still;
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will;
The ship is anchor’d safe and sound, its voyage closed and done;
>From fearful trip, the victor ship, comes in with object won;
Exult, O shores, and ring, O bells!
But I, with mournful tread,
Walk the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

**********
To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time
- Robert Herrick

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying;

**********
And this same flower that smiles today,
To-morrow will be dying.
The glorious lamp of heaven, the Sun,
The higher he’s a-getting;
The sooner will his race be run,
And nearer he’s to setting.
That age is best, which is the first,
When youth and blood are warmer;
But being spent, the worse, and worst
Times still succeed the former.
Then be not coy, but use your time,
And while ye may, go marry;
For having lost but once your prime,
You may for ever tarry.

**********
O Me! O Life!
O ME O life!...of the questions of these recurring:
Of the endless trains of the faithless-- of cities fill’d with the foolish;....
What good amid these, O me, O life?
Answer.
That you are here-- that life exists, and identity;
That the powerful play goes on, and you will contribute a verse.

**********
Show me the heart unfettered by foolish dreams
And I’ll show you a happy man
- Tennyson
*
But only in their dreams can men be truly free
It was always thus and always thus will be.
- Keating

**********
I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately,
I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life,
To put to rout all that was not life and not when I had come to die
Discover that I had not lived.
- Thoreau

**********
The Prophet
Teach me to Love? go teach thyself more wit;
I chief Professor am of it....
The God of Love, if such a thing there be,
May learn to love from Me.
He who does boast that he has been
In every Heart since Adam's sin,
I'll lay my Life, nay Mistress on't that's more;
I teach him thing he never knew before;
- Cowley

**********
Ulysses
"Come, my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world...
for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset,....
and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.
-Tennyson

**********
Most men live lives of quiet desperation. - Thoreau

**********
Dare to strike out and find new ground.

**********
I sound my barbaric YAWP over the rooftops of the word.. - Whitman

**********
The Road Not Taken

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Shall I compare thee to a summer's day
Thou art more lovely and more temperate
-Shakespeare

**********

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
All that's best of dark and bright
Melt in her aspect and her eyes:
- Byron

**********

A Midsummer Night's Dream
If we shadows have offended,
Think but this -- and all is mended--
That you have but slumber'd here
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream,
Gentles, do not reprehend;
If you pardon, we will mend.
And, as I am an honest Puck,
If we have unearned luck
Now to escape the serpent's tongue,
We will make amends ere long;
Else the Puck a liar call:
So, good night unto you all,
Give me your hand, if we be friends,
And Robin shall restore amends.

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The Road Not Taken

**********

Bright Star
by John Keats

Bright star! would I were steadfast as thou art—
Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night,
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
Like Nature's patient sleepless Eremite,
The moving waters at their priestlike task
Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
Or gazing on the new soft fallen mask
Of snow upon the mountains and the moors—
No—yet still steadfast, still unchangeable,
Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever—else swoon to death.
EXCERPT FROM...

When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd

by Walt Whitman

1

When lilacs last in the door-yard bloom'd,
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,
I mourn'd—and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

O ever-returning spring! trinity sure to me you bring;
Lilac blooming perennial, and drooping star in the west,
And thought of him I love.

2

O powerful, western, fallen star!
O shades of night! O moody, tearful night!
O great star disappear'd! O the black murk that hides the star!
O cruel hands that hold me powerless! O helpless soul of me!
O harsh surrounding cloud, that will not free my soul!

3

In the door-yard fronting an old farm-house, near the white-wash'd
palings,
Stands the lilac bush, tall-growing, with heart-shaped leaves of rich
green,
With many a pointed blossom, rising, delicate, with the perfume
strong I love,
With every leaf a miracle......and from this bush in the door-yard,
With delicate-color'd blossoms, and heart-shaped leaves of rich
green,
A sprig, with its flower, I break.

4

In the swamp, in secluded recesses,
A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song.

Solitary, the thrush,
The hermit, withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements,
Sings by himself a song.

Song of the bleeding throat!
Death's outlet song of life—(for well, dear brother, I know
If thou wast not gifted to sing, thou would'st surely die.)
ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS WHILE VIEWING THE FILM:

Section 1

Time:

Summary: It's opening day at an upper-crust private boy's school in the 1950s. The ceremonies begin with great pomp and a rehearsal of the school's traditions. The section ends after Neil and Todd meet.

Vocabulary:
1. pillar: a column that supports the roof of a building
2. tradition: something that is done the same way consistently in a society
3. honor: respect from society
4. discipline: self-control
5. excellence: the best possible work
6. Ivy League: 8 universities that are usually considered the best in the USA

Questions:
1. What are the "Four Pillars"? What would your "Four Pillars" be if you were designing a school?
2. Talk about an experience in school or a teacher who changed your life.
3. What adjectives could you use to describe the teachers at Welton? the students?
4. How is Welton different from other American schools? Is this difference good?
5. What values do you think are important to the parents of students at Welton?

For Further Discussion:
1. Take quite a bit of time to introduce the cultural setting for the film with questions to build their background knowledge:
2. What different kinds of schools are there in your country? Do they have different purposes? Different populations?
3. What images come to your mind when you think of American schools?
4. What do you know about public, private, and prep schools?
5. What's your opinion of the American educational system?
6. What was America like in the 1950s? What major historical or cultural events were occurring at that time? (society, politics, economy, religion, military, technology, etc.)
7. Where is New England? What is it known for?
8. Introduce students to some of the key people American or English icons who are referred to in the film: John Wayne, Marlon Brando, William Shakespeare, Henry David Thoreau, Robert Browning, Robert Frost, Walt Whitman, Walt Disney (Uncle Walt), Keats, Lord Byron, Tennyson.
Time:

Summary: The caste of boys in introduced. Each boy represents a certain type of student with basically one-trait personalities that make them easy to identify. They mock the school’s principles, trying to hide their nervousness about being back at school. Neil, the group’s social leader, has a confrontation with his authoritarian father regarding his extracurricular activities. The scene ends when the boys have attended almost all of their classes for the first day, and have just entered Keating’s room.

Vocabulary:
1. a stiff: a dead person (euphemism)
2. put one's foot in one's mouth: say something that embarrasses you
3. bootlicking: trying to make a superior like you by doing extra favors (slang)
4. valedictorian: the best student in a class
5. extracurricular: activities that are not assigned by a school
6. dispute: disagreement
7. travesty: terrible mistake
8. horror: terrible, frightening
9. decadence: choosing to live without self-control
10. excrement: solid waste that comes out of the body (medical term)

Questions:
1. Describe the situation between Neil and his father. What did they disagree about?
2. Tell a little about each of the boys. List their names and a brief description of them.
3. How do the boys act toward each other when they meet?
4. What is unusual about Todd's brother?
5. Describe Neil's conversation with his father. Why was Neil's father upset? Why was Neil upset?
6. What classes do the boys take?
7. Describe the teachers at the school.

For Further Discussion:
1. Take a little time to discuss typical first-day-of-school activities in the native culture.
2. Discuss body language in different situations, i.e. with peers vs. with parents, in friendly situations vs. in a confrontation. Focus on the use of eye contact in various settings.
Section 3

Time:

Summary: The students attend Mr. Keating's class for the first day, receive a lecture on the importance of living life to the fullest, and leave with various interpretations of his class, varying from intrigued to bemused.

Vocabulary:
1. captain: military leader
2. rumor: stories that do not have any evidence to prove if they are true
3. hymnal: book of religious songs
4. Carpe Diem: (Latin) Seize the Day
5. lads: young men (archaic, Scottish)
6. invincible: cannot be conquered, cannot be destroyed
7. "the world is your oyster": the world is something that may have a treasure for you
8. one iota: a tiny amount
9. fertilizing: adding nutrients to the soil
10. daffodils: yellow flowers that grow in spring
11. legacy: inheritance, what someone leaves behind that is valuable
12. spooky: scary, feeling like ghosts are present
13. suit yourself: do whatever you want

Questions:
1. What is unusual about Mr. Keating's English class?
2. What does Keating ask the students to call him? Why does he ask them to call him this?
3. How would students in your culture respond to someone like Mr. Keating as a teacher?
4. How does Keating try to gain the boys' trust?

For Further Discussion:
1. Many cultures value poetry more highly than Americans do. Be prepared to take some time discussing the form, rhythm, rhyme, symbols, and general meaning of the poems throughout the film.
2. Many students will respond well to reading poems allowed if they are given time to prepare. Consider assigning the memorization of certain stanzas as homework.
3. With Russian-speaking students, focus especially on the way certain syllables are stressed in a poem and on the changes in vowel length and intonation to show emotion. (The Russian language tends to have shorter vowels and more abrupt intonation changes than English, tending to make native-English speakers perceive speakers with Russian accents as unusually angry or aggressive.)
4. When introducing himself, Keating refers to a poem by Walt Whitman (19th-century American Poet) called "O Captain! My Captain!". Whitman wrote the poem in memory of President Abraham Lincoln shortly after Lincoln was assassinated. In "O Captain...", Whitman talks for a "ship" and a "fearful trip". What is he referring to through these images?
Section 4

Time:

Summary: Knox has dinner with friends of his parents and develops a crush on their daughter, Chris. Mr. Keating uses various dramatic techniques to build enthusiasm for poetry. The other teachers don't approve, but the boys like it. The boys discover a yearbook from when Keating was a student, and it identifies him as head of the Dead Poets Society. He tells them about the group and they decide to revive it without his knowledge. The section ends as they run back into the classroom.

Vocabulary:
1. spitting image: the exact copy (slang)
2. like father, like son: the son is a copy of his father
3. engaged: promised to be married to someone
4. jerk: (slang) rude person
5. misguided: believing false ideas
6. cynic: someone who believes there is no good
7. realist: someone who believes that you should admit the good and bad
8. hell-raiser: a wild person who causes trouble
9. amnesia: a mental disease causing loss of memory
10. marrow: the material inside the bones
11. demerits: official punishments, usually in the military
12. swoon: lose consciousness (usually used of women, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries)

Questions:
1. Why is Knox upset after meeting Chris? What does he plan to do about it?
2. According to Mr. Keating, what is the difference between good and bad poetry?
3. What is the Dead Poets Society?
4. Why is Knox upset after meeting Chris? What does he plan to do about it?
5. In your country, what could a man do if he was in Knox's situation?
6. Why does Mr. Keating tell the boys to rip the pages out of the book? What does he want to teach them?
7. How do the students respond to Keating's teaching style?
8. How do the other teachers respond to Keating's teaching style?
9. What is the Dead Poets Society?
10. Why does Keating say that the school administration would not approve of the Society? Why would they object?
11. Do groups like the Dead Poets Society exist in your country? If not, why not? If so, how are they treated by the school system? Why?

For Further Discussion: Many students have reacted very negatively to Keating's flippancy and pride in disregarding tradition. If students disapprove, encourage a discussion among the students but be careful to avoid taking sides. The goal is to get the students to talk, not to get them to challenge their country's educational system or values.