

**NONCONFORMITY OF TEACHER AND STUDENTS IN
PETER WEIR'S *DEAD POETS SOCIETY***

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Abstract. *Dead Poets Society* is an Academy-Award winning film which tells the story of an unconventional English teacher who motivates his students to live their life to the fullest. In an educational institution which is full of rules, John Keating and seven of his students are shown to be the individuals who are breaking the school rules. This thesis deals with the nonconformity aspects which exist in the movie *Dead Poets Society* focusing mostly on the life of John Keating and seven of his students. The aim of this writing is to analyze the intrinsic aspects of the movie including narrative and cinematic elements and the extrinsic aspects of the movie, the nonconformity of teacher and students using Ralph Waldo Emerson's ideas of nonconformity in Self-Reliance. Library research is used to collect the data needed for this thesis. The writer uses objective approach to analyze the intrinsic aspects of the movie, and for the extrinsic aspects, the writer uses Self-Reliance as the main theory. The results show that the nonconformity of John Keating has motivated seven of his students to also be a nonconformist like him.

Keywords: *Dead Poets Society*, nonconformity, teacher-students relationship

A. INTRODUCTION

What older people have taught to their following generation from time to time is that they should respect their country by knowing what the founding fathers of their country have believed and done to their country in the past. A lot of essential philosophical ideas which created a country came from them. The writer believes that no country is great without the struggle of its people. The people, the citizen of a country, obviously is the most fundamental aspect to make a country stands powerfully.

In *Introduction to Sociology*, Tischler argues that individualism is one of the values which Americans have to fulfil their individual happiness, in which he adds Americans believe that one should be happy with his life (2008: 63). In the writer's opinion, individualism and the way American people struggle to reach the highest welfare of their life are two of the most relevant thoughts or philosophical ideas of the Americans today. The writer considers individualism as the perspective which believes that a person should struggle individually to reach the highest welfare of their life without help from other persons. A person can live a better life because he struggles

to reach such a life by himself and for himself. Apart from individualism, other American popular thought is nonconformity.

Related to individualism, nonconformity is another thought popular in American society because it deals with the ideas that a person should never surrender their own thoughts, beliefs, and actions which come from within themselves so that they can harmonize with those of the others. Thus, a person should also represent their own originality without being afraid to show it to the world. Nonconformity was born from the minds of some American transcendentalists who believed they have to do something because at that time they were still under the shadow of the Puritans who were the majority of residents of the state of Massachusetts. These transcendental thoughts were abundantly propagated in the form of literary works.

Among the nineteenth century American Transcendentalists, Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson are two of the most popular American Transcendentalists at the moment (Wilson, 2000: 2). They both are known for pioneering the Transcendentalist Club in Concord, Massachusetts with some other like-minded intelligences. To exclude Thoreau and other nineteenth Century American Transcendentalists, Ralph Waldo Emerson is an epitome of nonconformity because there are essential ideas of nonconformity in one of his essays entitled *Self-Reliance* (1841). In the essay, Emerson states:

What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. It is the harder, because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude (Emerson, 1841).

That quotation easily demonstrates one of the essential ideas of nonconformity. From that quotation, it can be seen that Emerson really encourages people to respect themselves as a person, not as a member of society, in which it is a proper explanation of nonconformity as an understandable philosophical idea.

That foundation of America's nonconformity ideas can also be seen through its products of popular culture such as literary works and movies. Movie, as one of the most effective means of presenting philosophical ideas of certain society, plays an important role in defining what America is. The writer highly believes that through movies America succeeds to promote to the world their philosophical ideas.

One of the movies which describes the nonconformity in American society is 1989's *Dead Poets Society*. It depicts the nonconformity which happens in educational setting. The nonconformists are the teacher and the students, in which they are supposed to follow the rules given by the school as an educational institution. Therefore, this makes the movie interesting and worthy to be analyzed; how the individuals who have to follow the rule is at the same time the ones who break the rule.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Self-Reliance*

Self-Reliance is an essay written by Emerson included in 1841's collection of his essays, *Essays: First Series*. Similar to all of the Emerson's essays, *Self-Reliance* is an essay that is full of encouragements. From the first to the last paragraph of *Self-Reliance*, to the writer point of view, he regularly declares his persuasive thoughts about self-reliance. These persuasive thoughts are the ideas that Emerson writes as a passionately encouraging cheer for people to recognize themselves as a human being and a person with greatness in things that may vary to every person.

Self-Reliance deals greatly with encouragements about respecting one's self in their nature, actions, interactions, and roles while struggling to be living life to the fullest. When dealing with one's nature, he expresses "no law can be sacred to me but that of my nature" (1995: 26). Nature is related to the character of a person. Never any law or standard can be measured as something greater than how we recognize our most original character as a person. As for one's actions and interactions, the writer considers both can be related to this quotation:

These are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs (Emerson, 1995: 25-26).

Although there are many to quote about actions and interactions, the writer thinks the preceding quotation explains society more boldly, in which he thinks one of the most concerned thoughts

Emerson tries to express is the harm of society to one's self. And like what Emerson states, what seems to be the most ideal end a person can do to "play safe" is to conform to society.

Emerson absolutely does not like the idea of conforming to society. About it, he subtly repeats in *Self-Reliance* that nonconformity is a thing one must do in life as a person. To not conforming in society is something valuable to do as a way to respecting one's self. Nonconformity is mostly, if not wholly, what *Self-Reliance* is always about and popular for.

2. Nonconformity in Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Self-Reliance*

To see the main ideas of nonconformity, to get what it is all about, it is essential to read *Self-Reliance* since there are so many essential ideas of nonconformity stated by Emerson in the essay. To make it more trackable when quoting *Self-Reliance* throughout this writing, the writer uses the *Self-Reliance* text included in the collection of Emerson's works, *Essays and Poems*, consisting numerous of Emerson's selected works. In the ninth paragraph of *Self-Reliance*, as a statement that highly proposes nonconformity in a simple gesture, Emerson writes:

What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. It is the harder, because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude (Emerson, 1995: 27-28).

Nonconformity is about how one can be a nonconformist in a world that conforms to society. Nonconformity is about staying true to ourselves even when the "world whips us with its displeasure" (Emerson, 1995: 28). Even when the uneasiness of society is striking like disease, we still have to be in union with our soul and mind. In our "actual" and "intellectual" life we have always been faced with burden from the society. Society demands us to do things we often despise. Emerson states that a person too, should never only listen or absorb things without experiencing the things themselves either the things good or bad (1995: 26).

Nonconformity, as Emerson would always say in the essay, is about the progress of our “inmost” as it is walking side by side with our intuition, and as our own belief meets with our intuition, consistency is really something we must set aside for it can delay our progress. He states “a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds” (1995: 29), and it means if one is being consistent for a thing that is never progressive and advantageous, especially for one’s self, it is the same as conformity.

Nonconformity is about self-trust, self-respect, and of course, self-reliance. In a proclamation-like passage, Emerson writes:

I appeal from your customs. I must be myself. I cannot break myself any longer for you, or you. If you can love me for what I am, we shall be the happier. If you cannot, I will still seek to deserve that you should. I will not hide my tastes or aversions. I will so trust that what is deep is holy, that I will do strongly before the sun and moon whatever inly rejoices me, and the heart appoints. If you are noble, I will love you; if you are not, I will not hurt you and myself by hypocritical attentions. If you are true, but not in the same truth with me, cleave to your companions; I will seek my own. I do this not selfishly, but humbly and truly (1995: 37-38).

Emerson encourages us to escape from the customs if we truly have different beliefs with others, because it stops us from being ourselves. The interaction of us with society remains in how society acts to our nonconformity. Everything should depend on society if at last what we have done to not conforming cannot be understood by the society. At last, Emerson, regarding the truest needs of nonconformist, believes that “nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles” (1995: 46).

C. RESEARCH METHOD

The writer uses library research as the research method to get the data needed. There are two kinds of data which are used in this research. The main data is from the movie *Dead Poets Society* and the supporting data is from the books, journals, and other articles either in the printed or electronic form.

The writer uses objective approach to analyze the intrinsic aspects of the movie. The intrinsic aspects of the movie covers narrative and cinematic elements of the movie. The narrative elements in general include theme, setting, character, and plot while the cinematic element

includes the cinematic aspects in the movie such as camera distance, camera movement, and, sound.

The extrinsic element which the writer uses is the nonconformity ideas that are written in Emerson's *Self Reliance* (1841). Nonconformity in *Self-Reliance* is the encouraging thoughts delivered by him believing that a person should stay true to the beliefs and thoughts that came from within themselves, and convert them into actions. By doing so, a person should never be afraid to show their own originality to the world.

D. ANALYSIS

1. Nonconformity Perspectives of John Keating as Teacher

Schools, as educational institutions, consist of teachers and students as its main population. Apart from them, it has also school board and staffs that create, monitor, and evaluate the rules and everything that is going on inside the school. It is a sure thing that every teacher and student, especially in a school like Welton, should follow all the rules given by the school. *Dead Poets Society*'s characters are interesting to be analyzed because its main characters are a teacher and his students that somewhat break the rules. The main character of a teacher is John Keating, and seven of his students who are the members of Dead Poets Society club include Neil Perry, Todd Anderson, Knox Overstreet, Richard Cameron, Charlie Dalton, Gerard Pitts, and Steven Meeks.

John Keating is an English Teacher who frequently uses philosophical ideas of his own and certain literary works in his teaching. Played by Robin Williams, Keating's character shows a set of personalities which describe that he is: unconventional, cleverly humorous, extremely open-minded, and passionate.

John Keating's way of thinking can be related to his purpose to be the "captain" of his students. In the opinion of the writer, Keating's role as a "captain" makes him to think that those four needs are the things that the students need the most. Keating wants the students to have the need to live, the need to love, the need to learn, and the need to leave a legacy.

One of the most important parts in the plot regarding the extraordinariness of his teaching is the scene where he tells his students to rip the introduction pages of a poetry theory book.

Keating : Keep ripping gentlemen. This is a battle, a war. And the casualties could be your hearts and souls. (Keating holds out the basket to Charlie Dalton) Thank you Mr. Dalton. Armies of academics going forward, measuring poetry. No, we will not have that here. No more of Mr. J. Evans Pritchard. Now in my class you will learn to think for yourselves again. You will learn to savor

words and language. No matter what anybody tells you, words and ideas can change the world.
(*Dead Poets Society* : 00:24:34)

The monologue above shows that what seems to be the point of the way he teaches is that he teaches extremely but in the most proper way. A poem can be a representation of a person's ideas and feelings. If it is learned theoretically without any practicality, it remains useless. That is the reason why Keating considers poetry learning as a "war". It is the best chance for the students to have a meaning in learning; that they have to think for themselves without any boundaries from the teacher.

Keating : 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. 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. To quote from Whitman, "O me, O life... of the questions of these recurring, of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities filled 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 may contribute a verse." (Pauses) "That the powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse." What will your verse be?
(*Dead Poets Society*, 00:24:58)

Keating also tries to convey the most important thing about poetry to a human being. In the monologue above, he states that human stays alive for the things expressed in poetry such as beauty, romance, and love. The difference between poetry and lectures such as medicine, law, and business is that poetry deals not merely about human survival, but human life. People should not be only exist, but they should live. Through words and ideas, people can live their life to the fullest. The phrase "you may contribute a verse" indicates the encouragement that every person in this world has the same chance to be who they want to be.

2. Nonconformity Perspectives of John Keating's Students

The nonconformity of the students is started when John Keating starts to give his motivation to the students. Their nonconformity starts to grow as they choose the Dead Poets Society club as their channel to live their life to the fullest. There are consequences to take to be a nonconformist that are depicted in the students' nonconformity acts.

The first act of nonconformity is struggling to reach for what one loves and believes, depicted in Knox Overstreet and Charlie Dalton certain scenes. Emerson's argument about a man's deed is that man "must take himself for better, for worse as his portion" (1995: 24). This happens

to both Knox Overstreet and Charlie Dalton's act of nonconformity. Knox Overstreet takes a better portion for himself as he is to reach for the one he loves while the foolish, rule-breaking Dalton is a worse portion of nonconformity.

Another act of nonconformity is Neil Perry against his father, which is about how one conforms to his social role as a son, forcing him to obey his father, but at the very peak of his own solitude, he still holds highly what he wants and rebels. What Neil Perry always does his entire life is ascribing to his status as a son. He finally escapes himself from the burden from his father by committing a suicide.

According to Durkheim, in *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, Neil's type of suicide is egocentric suicide, in which one of the causes of it is a person's suffering in ascribing to his family role (2005: 171). It shows one of the concepts of nonconformity that says "nothing can bring you peace but yourself" (Emerson, 1995: 46), and it is shown that committing a suicide seems to be one last act of freedom to have the most independent self. Neil's suicide describes the peace that he has always desired to have to be himself. The solution he chooses to do to bring peace to himself about the burden from his father is to be a god for himself by taking his own life.

At the end of the movie, the shy, introverted Todd Anderson turns into the one that protects Keating the most through the end of the movie. He turns out to be the one who is influenced greatly by Keating. Todd stands up on his desk, saluting respect to Keating before his departure by shouting to him "O Captain, My Captain". It triggers the other students to also pay respects to Keating by standing up on their desks. His bravery shows that he believes in what is right and what is wrong about the truth. Todd's action shows that "all persons have their moments of reason, when they look out into the region of absolute truth; then will they justify me and do the same thing" (Emerson, 1995: 38).

Todd Anderson's last act of nonconformity shows that he has become a renewed person. Todd has conquered his introverted self to stand for what is right for him and Keating in the last scene of the movie. He shows the bravery of a leader by showing his principle thoughts that Keating is right and the only captain for the students. The last scene of the movie shows that at last what really matters is "the triumph of principles" (Emerson, 1995: 46).

E. CONCLUSION

Dead Poets Society shows to the world that school can be a place for young people to learn about life if there is a right teacher. John Keating is the illustration of that kind of teacher. Teaching English in an American preparatory school named Welton that has teachers to teach but not to lead, Keating has become the only captain to lead the students to live their life to the fullest through words from poems and philosophical ideas from certain figures.

Keating is a nonconformist, and there are several aspects of nonconformity that exist in *Dead Poets Society* depicted in his character and he has changed seven of his students into a nonconformist too using motivations and encouragements. The aspects of nonconformity represented by Keating and seven of his students are related to Ralph Waldo Emerson's idea of nonconformity in *Self-Reliance*.

Keating's nonconformity actions can be seen from his way of thinking and his extraordinary teaching method. On the other hand, the students' nonconformity actions are started and can be seen as they are motivated and encouraged by Keating. Among the seven students are Knox Overstreet who has struggled to reach for his love, Charlie Dalton who has been the most nonconformist of the students, Neil Perry who has freed himself from the burden of his father, and Todd Anderson who has conquered himself. All of these nonconformity actions result in consequences which are either good or bad, but they highly show the idea of living life to the fullest.

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