

Topics and Tasks for Analysis

CHAPTER 1 (1–8)

- You have participated in the welcoming ceremony of Welton Academy now. What are your first impressions of that school and its teachers?
- Describe and discuss the “four pillars” of Welton Academy. Could you think of alternative principles/values?
- Describe your first impressions of Todd, Knox, Charlie, Neil, and Cameron.
- What does the reaction of the parents reveal about the relationships with their sons?
- After reading the first chapter, speculate about possible themes and conflicts in the novel.
- Check history books and encyclopaedias and try to get information about the USA in 1959 and the years around.

CHAPTER 2 (9–14)

- Which additional information do you get about the boys?
- How do you see the relationship within their group?
- What impression of the atmosphere at Welton Academy have you got so far?

CHAPTER 3 (15–19)

- How does Mr. Perry treat his son? What do you think about his methods?
- How do the other boys react to the confrontation?
- Compare Todd’s and Neil’s situation.
- Try to explain why Neil jabs his thumb with a pin.

- What does Keating tell the boys about the “Dead Poets Society”?
- Why do they want to recreate that secret group?
- Taking Chapter 1 to 6 into account, try to characterize Keating. Do his aims and methods appeal to you? Does he qualify as a ‘good’ teacher? Discuss.
- In preparation for the next chapter, try to get information about Henry David Thoreau and *Walden*.

CHAPTER 7 (51–66)

- Describe the refoundation of the Dead Poets Society.
- Explain the “opening message” from Thoreau’s *Walden* (p. 53). What does it suggest? Why does it, like the other literary quotations, appeal to the boys?
- Keating says that language was invented “to woo women”. Discuss his thesis in class.
- Keating tries to teach the boys to find their “own voice” (p. 61). Do you consider this as a main educational aim? Could you think of other objectives that are just as important for one’s personal development?
- Explain Neil’s decision to act in a play. Speculate about possible consequences.
- How does Neil manage to get Todd into the Dead Poets Society?

CHAPTER 8 (67–80)

- Explain why Keating combines his soccer instruction with poetry and the rhythm of classical music.
- Is there a common idea in the quotations Keating has chosen? Discuss.
- Comment on his thesis that “the most important thing in all sport is the way other human beings push us to excel” (p. 70).

CHAPTER 4 (20–27)

- Describe the students’ first lessons in chemistry, Latin and maths. What is your opinion about the methods used by their teachers?
- How does Mr. Keating’s teaching style differ from that of his colleagues?
- Which means does he use to motivate the students?
- Describe their reaction.
- Keating invites the boys to call him “O Captain! My Captain!”. Could you imagine why? Support your view by looking up Whitman’s poem.
- What does Keating mean by “Carpe Diem”? Explain.
- Imagine one of your teachers behaved like John Keating. How would you react?

CHAPTER 5 (28–42)

- How does Todd feel about the new school?
- Describe Knox’s visit at the Danburrys’. How does he react when he sees Chris?
- How does J. Evan Pritchard rate poetry? Do you think his method is useful?
- According to Keating, what is the importance of poetry? Do you share his view? What does poetry/literature mean to you?
- Look up in an encyclopaedia what you can find about William Wordsworth’s notion of romanticism and try to collect information about Walt Whitman and his poem *Leaves of Grass*.

CHAPTER 6 (43–50)

- How do Keating’s colleagues react to his unconventional methods?

- According to Keating, poetry is not restricted to the word but inherent in many aspects of life. Do you agree with this view or do you think it is too idealistic? Discuss in class.
- Describe how Keating teaches Todd to overcome his self-consciousness and to find his own poetic voice. Could you think of alternative ways of giving him confidence?
- How is the act of creating poetry presented in this scene?
- Keating’s ideas have also affected Charlie. Describe how he has changed.
- In preparation for the following chapter, try to get information about William Shakespeare and his play *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

CHAPTER 9 (81–97)

- What does Todd’s unwanted birthday present reveal about the relationship between him and his parents? What further information do we get about the position he has in his family?
- Keating quotes a few lines from Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken”. What is the purpose of this experiment? What is your opinion about it?
- Read the poem and show how it is linked with Keating’s philosophy.
- Explain the significance of Charlie’s changing his name to ‘Nuwanda’.
- Keating tells the boys that language was invented “to woo women”. How does Charlie put this idea into practice? What do you think of the way he treats the two girls?
- What happens to Knox during the party at the Danburys’?
- What is the function and effect of alternating between two different scenes in the second part of this chapter?

CHAPTER 10 (98–115)

- Describe the circumstances and consequences of Knox's amorous advances to Chris.
- What practical joke does Charlie play during the assembly?
- How is he punished by Nolan?
- How does Charlie react to Nolan's request that he should apologize and inform on the Dead Poets Society?
- Compare Nolan's and Keating's teaching aims as shown in their conversation. Do you share Nolan's view that the boys are too young to think for themselves?
- In this chapter, Mr. McAllister comments on Keating's educational methods again. What part does he play in the novel?
- How does Keating introduce his students to college? Do you think they will profit from this introduction? Discuss in class.
- What is your impression of Keating in this chapter? Is his behaviour convincing? Discuss.

CHAPTER 11 (116–129)

- How does Neil feel during his rehearsal for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?
- Describe his father's reaction. What do you think of the arguments he puts forward?
- What do the boys find out about Keating's private life when they are in his room? How does he react to their visit?
- Do you think Keating's advice to Neil will help the boy to solve his problems? Explain your view.
- How does Knox try to win Chris's love? What do you think about his tactics and the poem itself?

- Describe and discuss the behaviour of the boys during the investigation. Does Cameron's betrayal come as a surprise to you?

CHAPTER 15 (157–166)

- How do Meeks and Knox behave during Nolan's interrogation?
- Read the passage about Todd's interrogation aloud and explain his response to Nolan's demand to sign the incriminatory paper.
- Comment on the picture Nolan draws of Keating in this paper.
- Discuss the significance of Nolan's choosing the "excellent" Pritchard essay when taking Keating's English lesson.
- Before Keating leaves, the boys stand up on their desks "in silent salute" to their teacher. Explain the deeper significance of this scene.
- Imagine Keating keeps a diary. Write a short entry about the final scene from Keating's point of view. Do not forget to describe the thoughts and feelings that may have come into his mind.

NOW THAT YOU HAVE FINISHED READING THE BOOK

- Imagine it is Neil's funeral. One of Neil's friends speaks on behalf of the Dead Poets Society commemorating their dead friend. Write a speech for him.
- The year is 1960. The students are preparing a new year-book and Mr. Nolan wants to put in an obituary for Neil. What could he write?
- Imagine a trial about the death of Neil. Who is to blame for it? What can you say for or against Neil's parents, Dean Nolan, and Mr. Keating?

CHAPTER 12 (130–141)

- For what reasons may Neil not have told Keating the truth?
- How does the relationship between Chris and Knox develop?
- What reactions does the performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* produce in the audience?
- Analyse Neil's closing monologue and show how it is thematically linked with reality.
- Describe the general atmosphere at the end of this chapter. What means does the author use to heighten the dramatic effect?
- Read/act out Neil's departure from the group, trying to express how the different characters may have felt in this scene.

CHAPTER 13 (142–147)

- How does Mr Perry react to Neil's disobedience?
- Describe the mood of the boys before Keating arrives.
- Do you think the poem by e. e. cummings is well-chosen in this situation? Explain your view.

CHAPTER 14 (148–156)

- At the beginning of Chapter 14 you find a sequence of alternating scenes set in the Perrys' house and in the wood. What is the dramatic effect achieved by this technique?
- Neil's suicide is being paralleled by the "revelry" of the boys in the wood. Can you find any thematic links and symbolic elements in this sequence?
- How do Keating and the boys react to Neil's death?

- Which of the boys do you find most interesting? Explain your view.
- Describe the development you see in the characters of Neil, Todd, and Charlie.
- Which part do girls/women play in the book?
- Mr. Keating: an ideal teacher, a demagogue, a dreamer, a ...? What is your view of him?
- Would you recommend this book to other pupils? Give a speech in which you either recommend or advise against reading it.

IF YOU HAVE SEEN THE FILM

- Where are the main differences between the book and the film? Check especially the opening scene, Chapter 8 (Todd's "barbaric YAWP"), the description of Neil's suicide, the investigation in Nolan's office, and the final scene. What may be reasons for these differences?
- Did the actors conform to the image you had of the main characters when reading the book? Are they the right types and age? Do you think they ought to look different? Explain your view.
- Which means does the director use to create a certain mood/atmosphere in the film?
- Is the atmosphere created in the film the same as the one in the book? Discuss.
- What did you enjoy more, the book or the film? Why?