

Character Education in the *Dead Poets Society* Film

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Abstract

Character education plays a big role in the development of a student's character. Not only to be intelligent, education should also be implemented to teach morals to students. There are many literary works that can be made as a good example for character education conduct in schools, and one of those is films. Therefore, this study is conducted to find out the character education values in the *Dead Poets Society* film directed by Peter Weir. This study is descriptive in design and employs qualitative method with the use of character education rubrics by Lickona (1991). This study identifies the character education values in the *Dead Poets Society*. Based on the findings of the study, the film depicted all three of the good characters outlined by Lickona (1991) namely moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. However, moral faults can still be found in the film in the form of faulty moral actions taken by a few students, which can be made as a media of reflection for the audience. Eventually, this study is useful for understanding the values of character education contained in the film, so that it can be used as a valuable learning medium in the future.

Keywords: character education, dead poets society, film

Introduction

Education has always been subject to changing trends, ranging from teaching methods to curriculum to educational standards themselves. As time passes, education, of course, follows all of the changes that occur, adjusting to the current situation. Of course, there are many positive and negative aspects of change that must be handled as thoroughly as possible. To adapt to the times and keep up with the changes, numerous educational breakthroughs were made, one of which was character education.

Lickona coined the term "character education" in the early 1900s with his book, *The Return of Character Education*, which was followed immediately by his other writings (A. Kamaruddin, 2012). Education, according to Lickona (1991, p. 19), aims to help young people become smart and virtuous. Character education is everything that teachers do that has the potential to influence the character of their students, because teachers have the ability to form the character of their students (Ambarini, 2017). As a result, character education emerges to emphasize the necessity of good character in addition to intelligence itself, suggesting that education does not merely make students smart but also virtuous.

Character education teaches children not only what is right and wrong, but also instills the habit (habituation) of doing good so that students comprehend, can feel, and want to do good

(A. Kamaruddin, 2012). This is a bit different with moral education that basically is aimed to help students to understand moral phenomenon and defines the moral person as a predominantly thinking entity (Walker & Thoma, 2017). As a result, it is critical for students to learn not only academic lessons but also moral principles per se.

Character education has been around for a long time. In fact, it has existed in Indonesia since before the country's independence (Lubis, 2019). Until recently, character education has grown in popularity and is increasingly being advocated. Literature is one of many media that can be used to better understand this issue. According to Nugroho & Hidayat (2013), literature is needed in order to learn about people and their surroundings, as well as to understand their unique roles in the universe and aware of real-life problems. There are several media and platform that may be used to better understand it, one of which is art. Film is one of the most accessible forms of art to individuals of all ages and backgrounds. There are several films to choose from, but not all films offer moral elements that educate. There are, however, several films that explore moral and educational issues, one of which is *Dead Poets Society*.

Directed by Peter Weir, *Dead Poets Society* is an all-boys school-themed film set in the 60s in the United States. The film tells the story of an English teacher named John Keating and his teaching experience in Wellton Academy, an exclusive and traditional preparatory school for boys. Through his unconventional teaching methods, he inspires his students to pursue individual passions and make their lives extraordinary. However, his unorthodox ways in teaching also incurs the wrath of the conservative school management and parents, and sadly leads to the death of one of his students (Tan, 2016). This premise is what motivates the researcher to undertake this study, so that the researcher may understand the character education's value in the film and use it as a medium of reflection in today's education. As a result, this study is conducted to find out the character education in the *Dead Poets Society*. In the future, this study is expected to be a reference for teacher in teaching their students character education using film as learning media, especially *Dead Poets Society* film which contains good character values that are beneficial for students.

Literature Review

This study adopts the character education theory proposed by Lickona (1943), that is described in his book, *Educating for Characters* (1991). The book itself explores the importance of character education especially in the Westens, emphasizing that character education should be made mandatory in schools (Farida, 2014). In his book, Lickona explains that character education has three main elements, namely knowing the good (moral knowing), desiring the good (moral feeling), and doing the good (moral action) (Dalmeri, 2014). So, based on this thought, character education does not only teach good and bad as well as wrong and right, but also must instill these good habits so that they can be implemented properly as well.

In this study, a film is chosen as the material object entitled *Dead Poets Society*. Film itself is a literary work, as explained by (2003:434) in Kusuma (2019:22). Rumaria (2015) in her study explains that film is moving pictures where audience can see some parts of people's lives. Moreover, Kusuma (2019) describes films as being comprised of a series of separate images known as frames, and when these images are presented swiftly in succession, the

viewer is given the impression that motion is occurring; hence, a movie is also known as motion pictures. In *Dead Poets Society* itself various educational values can be found such as love and affection, respect, loyal and trustworthiness, bravery, self reliability, kindness and friendliness, sensitivity and humility, honesty, leadership, and sacrifice (Kusuma, 2019). Hence, the film is considered to be suitable as the research's material object.

Method

This research is a literature-based study, which is the branch of research design of qualitative design. According to Bogdan and Taylor in Saepudin (2011), qualitative research is "a research procedure that produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from people and observable behavior." It allows the researcher to analyze the moral-philosophical value, which is shown in the *Dead Poets Society* directed by Peter Weir, as the object of the study, then describe it as the findings of this analysis. Meanwhile, the type of the research is a document analysis. The researcher watches the *Dead Poets Society* film and identify the data related to the study. At last, data classification is conducted to help researcher in selecting the relevant ones which later on is described in the finding and discussion section of the study.

In this study, the researcher uses rubric as a research instrument. Quoted from *National Science Education Standards* in Luft (1999), rubric is described as "a standard of performance for a defined population." There are two types of rubric, namely holistic and analytical rubrics. According to Luft (1999), holistic rubrics are constructs with different levels of performance that describe the quality, quantity, or both quantity and quality of a task, whereas analytical rubrics are constructs with criteria that are subdivided into different levels of performance. In this research, analytical rubric is used as instrument due to its relevance with the study that analyzes the object of the study according to the existing criteria.

In his book entitled *Educating on Characters* (1991), Lickona mentions that character education consists of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. These three aspects represent the three aspects of intelligence in students, namely cognition, affection, and psychomotor. Therefore, they are essential, so that children can understand, feel, and conduct good values (Farida, 2014).

Table 1: Character Education Rubric

No.	Aspects	Descriptions
1.	Moral knowing	Moral awareness, knowing moral values, perspective-taking, moral reasoning, decision-making, and self knowledge
2.	Moral Feeling	Conscience, self esteem, empathy, loving the good, self-control, and humility
3.	Moral Action	Competence, will, and habit

Finding and Discussion

Findings

From the studies that have been carried out, several results were obtained which will be described in this sub-chapter. First, it is known that there has been a moral knowing aspect found in the film. This can be seen from how the teachers, especially Mr. Keating as the central figure, always incorporates philosophical and moral values in each of his teachings, as in the example scene below.

Keating : Keep ripping, gentlemen. This is a battle, a war. And the casualties could be your hearts and souls. Thank you, Mr. Dalton. Armies of academics going forward measuring poetry. No. We'll 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. (00:24:33-00:24:58)

In the scene above, Mr. Keating as an English teacher tries to incorporate his moral values into his teaching. As someone who is nonconformist and free, Mr. Keating also tries to teach his students to think freely and boldly. This is because according to him, "words and ideas can change the world." Through this statement, he tries to instill in his students moral awareness and knowing moral values, especially the moral values held by Keating himself, which are independence and freedom of thought. In addition, Mr. Keating also teaches his students to see things from different perspectives, which is also one of the characteristics of moral knowing. This is evidenced by the scene below.

Keating : No. Thank you for playing, Mr. Dalton. I stand upon my desk to remind myself that we must constantly look at things in a different way. You see, the world looks very different from up here. You don't believe me? Come see for yourselves. Come on. Come on. Just when you think you know something, you have to look at it in another way. Even though it may seem silly or wrong, you must try. I stand upon my desk to remind myself Consider what you think. Boys, you must strive to find your own voice. Because the longer you wait to begin, the less likely you are to find it at all. (00:43:01-00:43:54)

In the scene above, Mr. Keating asks his students to stand at the table in order to teach them symbolically that things have to be looked in different ways. The method used by Mr. Keating can indeed be considered unusual and unorthodox, but this is defended by Agustino (2017) who says that Keating teaches "extremely but in the most proper way."

Next, related to moral reasoning, decision-making, and self-knowledge have also been conveyed in the film. This can be seen in the scene where Neil Perry tries to consult with Mr. Keating and he accidentally saw a photo of a girl on Mr. Keating. The teacher then explains that he chooses to leave London and his girlfriend, in order to pursue his dream in teaching

Neil : She's pretty.

Keating : She's also in London. Makes it a little difficult.

Neil : How can you stand it?

Keating : Stand what?

Neil : You can go anywhere. You can do anything. How can you stand being here?

Keating : Because I love teaching. I don't want to be anywhere else. (01:24:50-01:25:02)

This also shows that there is a moral reasoning process in Neil about independence, that in life one has to be independent and able to make their own choices, which is related to decision-making abilities and self-knowledge, where in making decisions, of course one must understand yourself first.

The second character described by Lickona (1991) is moral feeling, which has the characteristics of conscience, self-esteem, empathy, loving the good, self-control, and humility. First, the conscience character is shown by Mr. Keating as he gives advice to Neil about his desire to act which his father vehemently opposes. Although known as a free and courageous person, instead of telling Neil to just act without his father's consent, Mr. Keating still tells Neil to politely ask his father's permission, and only act when he had his permission.

Keating : You're playing the part of the dutiful son. I know this sounds impossible, but you have to talk to him. Show him who you are, what your heart is. I know what he'll say. (1:25:46-1:25:54)

In the scene above, Keating consoles Neil to tell his father the truth instead of telling him to lie. This shows that Keating teaches his student to be honest, which makes them conscious of their own choices. In addition, self-esteem is also found in the film, as in the scene where Keating encourages Todd Anderson to be more confident.

Keating : Now, Todd, I would like you to give us a demonstration of a barbaric yawp. Come on, you can't yawp sitting down. Let's go. Come on, up. Gotta get in yawping stance. (56:14-56:25)

With the encouragement from Mr. Keating, Todd is shown at the end of the film to be someone who is more confident and brave. In addition, the character of empathy and loving the good is also shown in the film, one of which is when Neil Perry helps Todd in overcoming his sadness when his parents give him the same present every year for his birthday.

Todd : Today's my birthday.

Neil : Is today your birthday? Happy birthday.

Todd : Thanks.

Neil : What'd you get?

Todd : My parents gave me this.

Neil : Isn't this the same desk...?

Todd : Yeah, they gave me the same thing as last year.

Neil : - Oh. Maybe they thought you needed another one. Maybe they weren't thinking about anything at all.

Todd : The funny thing is about this is, I didn't even like it the first time.

Neil : Todd, I think you're underestimating the value of this desk set. I mean, who would want a football, or a baseball, or...?

Todd : Or a car?

Neil : Or a car, if they could have a desk set as wonderful as this one? I mean, if I were ever going to buy a desk set twice, I would probably buy this one both times. In fact, its shape is... It's rather aerodynamic, isn't it? I can feel it. Phew. This desk set wants to fly. (1:06:17-1:07:25)

In the scene above, Neil shows his empathy for Todd by comforting him. This also shows his loving the good character, that is through how he doesn't stay silent when he sees his friend feeling down, but instead, he comforts him and helps him feel better.

Furthermore, self-control and humility also appear in the film, as shown by the scene where Neil sees Mr. Keating to consult about his passion. When Neil comments about Mr. Keating's small room, the latter then explains humbly that a simple room was part of his job, and that this also done to keep him away from unimportant things that can interfere with his performance in teaching.

Neil : Gosh, they don't give you much room around here.

Mr. Keating : No, it's part of the monastic oath. They don't want worldly things distracting me from my teaching. (1:24:25-1:24:46)

The scene above shows the humble character and good self-control by Mr. Keating. Furthermore, the third finding is the there are aspects of moral action that are found in the film, namely competence, will, and habit. In the film, one of the scenes that shows the existence of moral competence is shown when Mr. Keating consoles Charlie when he gets reprimanded by Mr. Nolan for rebelling toward the school.

Mr. Keating : That was a pretty lame stunt you pulled today.

Charlie : You're siding with Mr. Nolan? What about carpe diem, sucking all the marrow out of life...?

Mr. Keating : Sucking the marrow out of life doesn't mean choking on the bone. Sure, there's a time for daring, and there's a time for caution. And a wise man understands which is called for.

Charlie : But I thought you'd like that.

Mr. Keating : No. You being expelled from school is not daring to me, it's stupid. Because you'll miss some golden opportunities.

Charlie : Yeah, like what?

Mr. Keating : Like if nothing else, the opportunity to attend my classes. Got it, Ace?

Charlie : Aye, aye, captain.

Mr. Keating : Keep your head about you. That goes for the lot of you.

Charlie, Students : - Yes, captain. - Yes, captain. (1:20:05-1:21:10)

Mr. Keating's response to Charlie's problem shows that there is good moral competence and moral will, as Mr. Keating shows effective problem solving in a morally good way (Lickona, 2012). Furthermore, the formation of moral habit can be seen from the school's teaching of dogma for students in the form of four school pillars, namely tradition, honor, discipline, and excellence.

Nolan : Gentlemen, what are the four pillars?

Students: Tradition, honor, discipline, excellence. (00:03:00-00:03:08)

In the scene above, it can be seen how Wellton Academy as preparatory school tries to instill dogma in its students, thus making it a school culture and ultimately making it into a habit that is always be taught by its teachers, except for Mr. Keating who has his own way in teaching. However, students' reactions to classroom instruction, which are often influenced by home settings, vary. Some students respond well to Mr. Keating's moral education, allowing them to grow into better characters, such as Todd Anderson, who appears quiet and introverted at the start of the film but grows into a brave and outspoken central character by the end.

Nolan : Leave, Mr. Keating. I said leave, Mr. Keating.

Todd : O Captain! my Captain!

Nolan : Sit down, Mr. Anderson. Do you hear me? Sit down. Sit down. This is your final warning, Anderson. How dare you? Do you hear me? (2:03:08-2:03:35)

In the scene above, Todd stands bravely to give his last respect to Mr. Keating who is expelled from the school following Neil's death, as Mr. Keating is suspected to be the one who triggered Neil in committing suicide. This particular scene shows how Todd has finally grown braver throughout the film under the influence of Mr. Keating. This is similar with Knox Overstreet who pursues his love to his crush, Chris, and ends up succeeded. Meanwhile, Charlie Dalton and Neil Perry seem to have inetrpret Mr. Keating's teaching differently, to the extent that they ended up taking an overturn in their life choices. Charlie, being a nonconformist he is, breaking the school's rules and showing the worse porcion of nonconformity itself (Agustino, 2017)

Mr. Nolan : This week's issue of Welton Honor, there appeared a profane and unauthorized article. Rather than spend my valuable time ferreting out the guilty persons... And let me assure you, I will find them. - I'm asking any and all students who know anything about this article to make themselves known here and now. Whoever the guilty persons are, this is your only chance to avoid expulsion from this school.

Charlie : Welton Academy, hello? Yes, he is. Just a moment. Mr. Nolan, it's for you. It's God. He says we should have girls at Welton. (1:15:42-1:16:35)

Besides Charlie, Neil Perry also demonstrates nonconformist behavior, as he initially always obeys his father, but in the end, at the height of his overwhelming emotions, he fights back and releases himself from his authoritarian father's clutch by committing suicide.

In this instance, committing suicide appears to be one last act of independence to have the most independent self (Agustino, 2017). Neil's remedy to his agony has been decided, and it is suicide.

Discussion

This section provides more explanation to address the problem of the study. The researcher offers in-depth explanations of the data that has been evaluated in order to make it more understandable in the following discussions.

In films, there are various forms of character education values that can be seen. Referring to Lickona (1991), the character values contained in *Dead Poets Society* are moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. The main point of moral knowing itself is about the cultivation of moral values, especially to students as recipients of knowledge. Moral knowing focuses on knowledge about morality itself, and is strongly related to human cognitive abilities (Dalmeri, 2014). In this film, Mr. Keating is the central figure who teaches moral values to his students. The main moral values held by Mr. Keating are freedom and independence, which are related to Mr. Keating as a nonconformist (Agustino, 2017). Therefore, he also tries to transmit his spirit of freedom of thought to his students through every of his teachings.

Moral knowledge given by Mr. Keating continues to be an encouragement to students to desiring the good, which refers to moral knowing that is related to affective skill (Dalmeri, 2014). This is shown a lot in the film, one of which is in the scene where Keating tells the shy Todd Anderson to shout "barbaric yawp" to make him bolder. In this scene, Mr. Keating tried to instill a brave character in Todd by making him scream. Indirectly, Keating encourages Todd to desiring to be brave, which is something Todd successfully achieves by the end of the film.

Furthermore, on the aspect of moral action which is related to psychomotor relating to actions, deeds, behavior, and so on (Dalmeri, 2014). The film *Dead Poets Society* itself shows a difference in responses between students where there are students who respond to Mr. Keating's moral education well, while some took the downside of his teaching. However, this cannot be separated from external factors, as in the case of Neil Perry, where his father plays a major role in his controversial decision to end his life. Neil's suicide expresses the peace he has always longed. He chooses to end his life as a means of bringing peace to himself (Agustino, 2017). Meanwhile, Charlie is essentially a mischievous nonconformist. As the story progresses, he grows braver and eventually confronts the school. However, in the end he receives gentle and yet impactful comments from Mr. Keating, who did not justify his juvenile behavior.

The researchers has not yet found any other researches that specifically discusses the character education aspect of the *Dead Poets Society* film. The closest studies that also talk about the same film are the study conducted by Agustino (2017) and Kusuma (2019). The findings of this study are in line with the results of the previous two studies, indicating that Mr. Keating's nonconformity as a teacher influences the character of students, and it is also known that there are educational values related to developing other aspects of personality, morals, and ethics, etc. that are related to education. This study, on the other hand, has a

slightly broader scope of research because it analyzes the character education values in the film in general.

Conclusion

The main goal of this study is to find out the character education in *Dead Poets Society* film. Thus, the researcher describes several scenes in the movie that reflects the character education values based on Lickona's *Educating for Characters* (1991).

In this research, the researcher finds out that all the three good characters as described by Lickona (1991) namely moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action are already present in the film. This can be seen by several scenes in the movie that show how the characters in the film already knowing the good, desiring the good, and also eventually doing the good. However, there are also some forms of moral faulty that still can be found as in how Charlie Dalton rebels toward the school and causing chaos and also when Neil Perry eventually committing suicide at the end of the day. As a result, the researcher recommends teachers to accompany or guide their students in watching this film, either directly or indirectly. This is done to avoid student misperceptions that could lead to undesirable outcomes. However, because it has interesting and essential moral problems to discuss, this film is still highly recommended as an alternate means of learning character education for teachers, students, and even parents. For future research, the researcher suggests performing empirical research and delving deeper into the implementation of the character education values in this film into real life teaching, so that more applicable knowledge about the subject of character education in this film may be achieved.

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