

**ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMMUNION AND FREEDOM:
A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF POPULAR FILM**

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ABSTRACT

On the Relationship Between Communion and Freedom:
A Philosophical Analysis of Popular Film

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In this thesis, I will demonstrate the essentiality of communion relationships in the attainment of freedom, in which I understand freedom to be the capacity to flourish. To do so, I will conduct a comparative and philosophical analysis of the popular films *Dead Poets Society* (1989) and *Good Will Hunting* (1997). Specifically, I will analyze these films in light of Martin Buber's seminal work *I and Thou* (1923), in which he categorizes human social existence into two modes: I-It relationships and I-You relationships. Whereas an I-It relationship is one of objectification, an I-You relationship is one of communion. Briefly, objectification is a failure at acknowledging the subjectivity of the other. Communion, on the other hand, is a state of intersubjectivity in which both persons reciprocally acknowledge the other's subjectivity. Principally, I will propose that *Dead Poets Society* illustrates a failed attempt by John Keating at begetting freedom in his student Neil Perry, whereas *Good Will Hunting* displays a successful attempt between Sean Maguire and Will Hunting. The key reason for the different results of the

films is that Will Hunting and Sean Maguire successfully enter into an I-You communion, whereas Neil and Keating fail to do so.

Moreover, I will delineate the communion process (or the failure thereof in the case of *Dead Poets Society*) as three stages: presentation, communion, and post-communion. Notably, the nature of the failure or success at communion lies in Keating's and Sean's respective approaches at encountering Neil and Will, which proves critical for the young men's development. Briefly, an encounter is, for Buber, a simultaneous movement of complete self-offering to and reception of the other. Therefore, I will show that where Keating fails to offer himself totally to Neil, thereby inhibiting his reception of Neil, Sean succeeds in his relationship with Will. As a result, Neil's life tragically ends in alienation, whereas Will's life begins anew in freedom. Ultimately, I will demonstrate from my analysis that the communion relationship is necessary in order to attain freedom and that film is a valuable source of philosophical reflection.

DEDICATION

To Dan

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Contributors

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis came about because I am convinced of three things. One, freedom is the proper end of human existence, in which freedom is understood to be the capacity to flourish. Two, freedom occurs by way of communion, that is, by way of intersubjective relationships. Third, film, because of its unique properties, serves as a privileged medium of philosophical reflection, now more than ever due to its influence in contemporary society. Along this vein, I am also convinced that the films *Dead Poets Society* (1989) and *Good Will Hunting* (1997) communicate essential truths about human existence. Therefore, what follows is, as the title suggests, a discussion on the relationship between communion and freedom by way of a philosophical analysis of these two films.

Freedom is often misunderstood as pertaining solely to the individual, but in actuality, freedom is attained and optimized in intersubjective relationships, which are relationships of communion. Briefly, to be free is to possess self-mastery, which is achieved by way of self-consciousness, for one cannot possess what one does not know. Likewise, to know oneself requires someone outside of ourselves, since we acquire knowledge, at least in part, by virtue of knowing what something is *not*. Thus, to know myself requires that I know one who is not myself, that is, another self. At the same time, this knowledge of another self cannot be of the same nature as knowing things from other things. This is to know objectively, to “know about.” In contrast, self-knowledge requires subjective knowledge because I am not just an object in the universe but a subject. Hence, I must also know another self subjectively; in other words, I must participate in intersubjectivity, which is communion. Therefore, the journey to freedom begins in communion.

Certainly, this understanding is crucial for people of any age wanting to live a free and fulfilling life, but for no one is this more important than for those on the cusp of adulthood. In fact, at this life stage occurs arguably the most significant reception of freedom, so a proper understanding of this freedom is crucial. Without it, lives are potentially ruined, but with it, one is on the road to human flourishing. This existential drama is pristinely captured in the films *Dead Poets Society* and *Good Will Hunting*, as both center on the relationship between a young man and an older male mentor attempting to initiate him into adulthood. Though adulthood ought to be a state of freedom, the reality is often far from it.

In *Dead Poets Society*, the central relationship I explore is between Neil Perry and John Keating. Neil is a diligent student of Welton Academy, a prestigious New England college preparatory school, as well as a young man full of passion yearning to live a rich and full life, but in Neil's mind, the only way for him to live such a life is to follow his dream of becoming an actor. This passion, however, is constantly quenched by his father, Tom Perry, who consistently crushes Neil's dreams by coldly demanding that Neil instead go to Harvard to study medicine. In truth, his father treats him as a vicarious instrument of success rather than a son whom he loves. In contrast to Tom Perry is John Keating, a new hire and alumnus of Welton Academy assigned to teach poetry. Due to his incredible charisma, Keating instantly charms the boys through his preaching that life is meant to be lived freely and passionately as opposed to second-handedly.¹ For Keating, a fulfilling life is freely pursuing the deep desires of one's heart and not resigning to the preconceived demands of parents, teachers, society, etc. Unsurprisingly, Keating's message strikes a deep chord in the students' hearts, especially Neil's. Following Keating's plea to "make

¹ John McDermott. "A Jamesian Personscape: The Fringe as Messaging to the 'Sick Soul,'" *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 39, nos. 3 & 4 (2011): <https://bulletin-archive.hds.harvard.edu/articles/summerautumn2011/jamesian-personscape>.

[their] lives extraordinary,” Neil and his close friends form “The Dead Poets Society.”²

Originally founded by Keating when he himself was a student at Welton, the Dead Poets are dedicated to what Thoreau calls sucking “out all the marrow of life” through a devotion to romantic poetry.³ Coupled with Keating’s enchantment, participation in this secret society awakens the boys’ souls.

Energized by the awakening of his soul, Neil embarks on a pursuit to fulfill his acting dream, though he does so discreetly because of his father’s explicit orders against it. In the end, however, Mr. Perry discovers his son’s secret, and, as punishment, he declares that he is pulling Neil out of Welton to enroll him in military school. Upon graduation, Neil will follow the path predetermined by his father—he will attend Harvard and become a doctor. Neil is completely defeated and unable to stand up to his father, as he believes his entire existence is encompassed by being an actor. If he cannot act, Neil believes that he will never be free, so, in despair, he takes his own life. In reaction to Neil’s suicide, the Welton administration and the parents of Welton’s students blame Keating for Neil’s death due to his close association with the Dead Poets Society. Although the film seems to end on a redemptive turn, as the boys remain faithful to their beloved teacher and their adaptation of his poetic way of life, we will see that this is, in fact, not as much of a redemption as the film appears to suggest on the surface.

Good Will Hunting, on the other hand, tells a not-so tragic tale. The film centers on the relationship between Will Hunting, the film’s namesake, and his therapist, Sean Maguire. At the start of the film, Will is 20 years old and working as a janitor at MIT, where Professor Gerald Lambeau discovers that Will has been secretly answering the advanced mathematics problems posted outside of his classroom, whereby he realizes that Will is an absolute genius with a truly

² *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir (1989; Los Angeles, CA: Touchstone Pictures), Amazon Prime Video.

³ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, (Project Gutenberg: 1995), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/205/205-h/205-h.htm>.

remarkable mind of indescribable potential. In spite of this, Will generally hides his capabilities because he is an orphan who survives by refusing intimacy with everyone so that no one can abandon him. Furthermore, he hides his pain behind his personality: the “wicked smart” kid from South Boston who likes to use his fists just as much, if not more, than his brains.⁴ Predictably, these actions routinely get Will in trouble with the law, and after he unsuccessfully attempts to represent himself, Lambeau strikes a deal with the court on Will’s behalf. The court releases Will to Lambeau’s supervision under the condition that Will undergo therapy. Thrilled with the idea, Will proceeds to mock and outwit all of the therapists Lambeau brings him to see, all the while proclaiming that the notion of him needing therapy is ridiculous. Accordingly, Lambeau contacts Sean Maguire, his old college roommate, who is now a retired counselor and local community college professor. Notably, Sean is a widower who is living a rather lackluster existence. Because Sean and Will had a similar upbringing in South Boston, Lambeau hopes that Sean will be able to get through to Will. Upon Lambeau begging him, Sean reluctantly agrees to meet Will. Their initial session is rough; nonetheless, Sean is intrigued by Will, so he agrees to meet regularly with Will, launching both on a journey towards an intimate friendship, an intimacy that neither foresee. As their relationship deepens in vulnerability, Sean challenges Will in ways the young man has never experienced. As a result, Sean earns Will’s trust and breaks through his false personality, allowing Will, perhaps for the first time, to grieve his long-suppressed pain. From this intimacy that heals both Will and Sean—Will from his childhood pain and Sean from the pain of the death of his wife—both men are freed to pursue their hearts’ desires, thus allowing them the opportunity to seek an authentic, flourishing existence. The film ends with Sean beginning an adventurous sabbatical in an effort to emerge from the dark rock that he has

⁴ *Good Will Hunting*, directed by Gus Van Sant (1997; Los Angeles, CA: Miramax Films), Amazon Prime Video.

been living under since the death of his wife, and Will embarking on a quest to pursue the girl he loves whom he fearfully let go.

As one can see, these films possess starkly different finales in spite of many similar themes and relationships. Briefly, both focus on young men who are afraid of wholeheartedly pursuing their desires because of their enslavement to fear, which is due in a significant way to the lack of a robust relationship with their fathers. This is distinctly clear in *Good Will Hunting*, due to the absence of Will's biological father and his foster father's alcohol-induced abuse. Thus, Will lives his life in fear of abandonment. While the dynamic between Neil and Mr. Perry in *Dead Poets Society* is more subtle, it is overtly clear that Mr. Perry is emotionally absent from Neil's life. Because there is no intimacy shared between the two of them, Neil has no idea how to approach his father with his desires. Moreover, Mr. Perry's harsh, angry reaction anytime Neil tries to voice his desires does nothing but further envelop Neil in fear and resentment. Therefore, a significant step in the maturation journey for Neil and Will is confronting their respective fathers. For Neil, this is literal, whereas for Will this is accomplished in retrospect. Notably, it is in this confrontation that Keating and Sean play a crucial role, for both have the opportunity to show their respective disciples what it means to live a flourishing life and how to live it, which, for Neil and Will, inevitably involves confronting their fathers and the wounds caused by them. Indeed, this is the only way forward if Neil and Will are to be free.

Through a comparative and philosophical analysis of the two films, I will propose that whereas *Dead Poets Society* demonstrates the drastic consequences of an impoverished communion, *Good Will Hunting* imparts a rich illustration of a robust communion and the freedom that results. Specifically, I will analyze these films through the lens of Martin Buber. Buber was a German-Jewish existentialist philosopher from the late 19th and early 20th centuries,

who is well-known for his philosophy of dialogue, which reacts against the “temptation to reduce human relations to the simple either/or of Apollonian or Dionysian, rational or romantic ways of relating to others.”⁵ In a word, Buber is motivated to proffer a philosophical anthropology that is true to human experience. Thus, his philosophy is influential not only to religious existentialists but also to thinkers working in the disciplines of phenomenology and philosophical anthropology. Furthermore, his most influential work is his short but powerful essay *I and Thou* (1923). As such, I will first provide a brief overview of *I and Thou*, which offers a philosophical vision of how freedom is a fruit of communion. Following this overview, I will move into a tripartite analysis of the films wherein I will break them down into the three sections: preparation, communion, and post-communion. These sections correspond to the three stages of the communion process. First, the preparation stage describes the *establishment* of the relationship between the two mentor-disciple pairs. In this section, I pay special attention to Keating’s and Sean’s respective approaches at initiating a relationship with Neil and Will. In addition, this first section will describe the conditions necessary for Martin Buber’s notion of encounter. Second, the communion section contrasts the nature of the failed encounter between Keating and Neil with the encounter and the resulting communion between Sean and Will. Third, the post-communion section explains the respective outcomes of the failed communion for Neil and the successful communion for Will. Ultimately, I will conclude with some final remarks regarding the overall intent of this project.

⁵ Michael Zank and Zachary Braiterman, “Martin Buber,” The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 28 July 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/buber/#Aca>.

1. BUBER'S PHILOSOPHY AS A PHILOSOPHY OF COMMUNION

“The world is twofold for man in accordance with his twofold attitude.”⁶ So begins Martin Buber’s classic work *I and Thou*, in which he divides humanity’s approach to the world into two modes of relation: I-It and I-You. Specifically, Buber characterizes these two modes as “two basic words” or “word pairs.”⁷ Notably, the *I* of I-It and the *I* of I-You are not the same. According to Buber, “there is no I as such but only the I of the basic word I-You and the I of the basic word I-It.”⁸ This is true because the two basic words are never said alone but always as a pair. The second half of each word pair, therefore, reveals the nature of its corresponding *I*.

First, the mode of I-It is one of objectification. Briefly, objectification is the denial of subjectivity. In Buber’s own words: “activities that have something for their object...is the basis of the realm of It.”⁹ Buber’s concern is that we, more often than not, enter into relationships through the mode of I-It, which thereby eliminates the humanity of the other person. When one says I of the I-It, he is one who lives the totality of his life as if it were a science. Scientists hypothesize, anatomize, systematize. The scientist belongs to “the world as experience,” says Buber, which is to say the empirical world.¹⁰ Consequently, the scientist knows and understands the world with expertise, but his stance towards the world is that of possession. Specifically, the scientific approach to the world is to gather empirical data in order to possess greater understanding and control of the world. Indeed, the scientist’s knowledge is solely knowledge *about*. To be clear, I am not proposing that the scientific approach of I-It is bad in and of itself.

⁶ Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 53.

⁷ Buber, *I and Thou*, 53.

⁸ Buber, *I and Thou*, 53.

⁹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 54.

¹⁰ Buber, *I and Thou*, 56.

Rather, I use this example in order to make an oft forgotten distinction in our highly scientized and technologized society. Without discounting the genuine advancements produced by the sciences—physical and social—we cannot expect to have meaningful relationships if we approach them according to the scientific method. That is, we cannot approach the people in our lives like variables in an experiment that can be controlled or manipulated at whim. The I-It relationship, therefore, seeks to minimize the variability of human existence—the capacity to develop, grow, surprise, take risks, etc. Indeed, Buber says that “it is not experiences alone that bring the world to man. For what they bring to him is only a world that consists of It and It and It, of He and He and She and She and It.”¹¹ In this vein, I-It entails no relationship at all, for in this mode man is the *only* subject in a world of objects, which makes acknowledgment of another’s subjectivity impossible and minimizes or even eliminates the acknowledgement of one’s own subjectivity. While the one who says I-It possesses a degree of self-consciousness (the foundation of subjectivity), his subjectivity is severely limited since he fails to acknowledge that the world is full of other subjects. Consequently, the “I” who says I-It will not recognize humanity in the other nor in himself. Naturally, the proliferation of I-It in the contemporary world raises a myriad of concerns: Have we completely de-mystified the natural world? Have we transformed sources of wonder into data points? Can we continue to do this without eventually imperiling ourselves? Admittedly, in response to these concerns, I lean towards the affirmative, that we have, in fact, de-mystified the natural world, transformed sources of wonder into data points, and imperiled ourselves. At the same time, all hope is not lost, and it lies in understanding Buber’s second word-pair: I-You.

¹¹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 55.

Whereas I-It treats people as objects among many in the world, I-You sees each individual person as a world unto himself, thus whoever says I-You speaks communion into existence. Communion is, precisely, intersubjectivity, a mutual movement of beholding and receiving, affirming and embracing the subjectivity of the other. While he never explicitly uses the word “communion,” Buber’s I-You captures its essence.

One may be wondering at this point: why *communion* as opposed to something else? I concede that I simply enjoy the word “communion,” but more than that, the image the word creates. Due to its association with the Christian sacrament, which is a human participation in the divine through a partaking of the body and blood of Christ, the notion of communion manifests the spiritual nature of interpersonal relationships, and thus moves beyond the mere physicality of the social world that Buber’s It represents. Communing with the other is *not* the same as socializing with the other. To commune is to say *You*; to socialize is to say *It*. The former recognizes subjectivity whereas the latter is blind to it.

Therefore, communion is the antithesis of objectification, for “whoever says You does not have something for his object.... Where You is said there is no something.... Whoever says You does not have something; he has nothing. But he stands in relation.”¹² Thus, the I of I-It grasps to possess; the I of I-You stands open-handedly to simultaneously offer and receive. This posture of simultaneous offering and reception is the posture of relationship, for “the basic word I-You establishes the world of relation.”¹³ In other words, this world of relation, once again in contrast to I-It, is not one of *experience* but rather of *participation*.¹⁴ Whereas experience is the

¹² Buber, *I and Thou*, 55.

¹³ Buber, *I and Thou*, 56.

¹⁴ Buber, *I and Thou*, 56.

action of I-It, participation is the action of I-You. Notably, the notion of participation aptly describes I-You, as it emphasizes a *shared* action as opposed to a *possessive* action.

Famously, Buber contends that it is possible to say I-You within three “spheres”: the sphere of nature, the sphere of men, and the sphere of spirit.¹⁵ Said differently, Buber proposes that we can enter into intersubjective relationships with nature, other human beings, as well as spiritual beings. For the purposes of this thesis, we will only be addressing the second sphere—I-You relationships with other human beings—which we will now consider by describing Buber’s understanding of the I-You communion in greater detail.

To begin, entrance into an I-You is a simultaneous movement of “will and grace,” which is to say that communion is not only an act of the will (an offering of the self) but also a gift (a reception of the other).¹⁶ Therefore, one cannot effort his way into an I-You relationship, no matter how hard he tries; yet he also cannot approach these relationships in a passive, quietist fashion. Furthermore, Buber designates the fundamental movement of the I-You communion as *encounter*. Uniquely, Buber uses this common word in a rather technical sense. For Buber, an encounter is not an unexpected meeting with someone or something. Rather, it is the first movement in the dance of communion, and he describes an encounter as a bodily confrontation.¹⁷ The two parts of this descriptor are key. First, an encounter is *bodily* because the encounter of I-You is not merely a psychical encounter of the other. Here, Buber resists the common temptation of modernity to divide the human person into a clear division of mind and body. Instead, Buber’s vision is one of integration. Notably, Buber communicates this idea in his strange but fascinating belief that one can enter into an I-You relationship with nature: “What I

¹⁵ Buber, *I and Thou*, 57.

¹⁶ Buber, *I and Thou*, 58.

¹⁷ Buber, *I and Thou*, 58.

encounter is neither the soul of a tree... but the tree itself.”¹⁸ Accordingly, how much more does the same logic apply to relationships with human beings? When I participate in a Buberian encounter with another person, we do not merely encounter each other’s minds or souls *alone*, but our bodies as well, the integration of which is who we are. Second, an encounter is a *confrontation*—not because of hostility—but because confrontation implies the jarring and totalizing nature of an encounter. Buber eloquently explains the confrontational quality of an encounter in the following:

When I confront a human being as my You and speak the basic word I-You to him, then he is no thing among things nor does he consist of things.

He is no longer He or She, limited by other Hes and Shes, a dot in the world grid of space and time, nor a condition that can be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. Neighborless and seamless, he is You and fills the firmament. Not as if there were nothing but he; but everything else lives in *his* light.¹⁹

The central notion Buber desires us to know is that the encounter inherent to I-You is an encounter with the *whole* person. As alluded to earlier, human beings are not a clear division of body and mind/soul but an integrated whole. Further, because humans are integrated beings, Buber says that the I-You encounter entails *exclusivity*.²⁰ What he means is that there is never a partial I-You relationship. One can never have a relationship with only a part of the other nor can one offer only a part of himself. The I-You communion, rather, requires a holocaust—an offering of the entire self, which understood relationally is a self-offering of complete vulnerability. Furthermore, if one must enter into communion with one’s “whole being”, the simultaneous

¹⁸ Buber, *I and Thou*, 59.

¹⁹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 59.

²⁰ Buber, *I and Thou*, 60.

movement of will and grace makes more sense, for “the relationship is election and electing, passive and active at once: An action of the whole being must approach passivity, for it does away with all partial actions and thus with any sense of action.”²¹ Certainly, Buber paints a seemingly paradoxical picture of the mystery of the I-You encounter.

Finally, Buber contends that an encounter must be “unmediated,” and thus never involve any mediating agenda, figure, or institution.²² Specifically, an encounter can never be mediated because we would then fail to encounter the other person but only a go-between. Notably, Buber believes the presence of a mediator entails a means, for then the person (mediator) encountered is only a means to some further end, which would then be using the person and placing us back in the world of I-It, the world of non-communion. Thus, the person to be encountered must never be a means but always the end. “Only where all means have disintegrated,” says Buber, “encounters occur.”²³

Admittedly, Buber’s notions of the I-It and I-You appear in one sense intuitively obvious, yet in another sense subtly complex. Therefore, we ought to ask: is there a more concise way to understand the Buberian encounter, this unmediated, totalizing movement of will and grace? I believe there is, and that to encounter is, quite simply, to love. Notably, Buber does not mean a *feeling* of love but love *itself*. He says: “Feelings one ‘has’; love occurs. Feelings dwell in man, but man dwells in his love. This is no metaphor but actuality; love does not cling to an I, as if the You were merely its ‘content’ or object; it is between I and You.”²⁴ To feel love, therefore, is to possess, which belongs in the realm of I-It. True love then is the space of communion in which

²¹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 62.

²² Buber, *I and Thou*, 62.

²³ Buber, *I and Thou*, 63.

²⁴ Buber, *I and Thou*, 66.

the I and You abide together in relationship. Ultimately, the I-You relationship is a communion of reciprocal belovedness.

A second question related to the one above is the question of why Buber goes to such painstaking detail to describe the communion love of I-You. Buber answers clearly: “Man becomes an I through a You.”²⁵ It is only through being seen, known, and loved by the other that we can see, know, and love ourselves and others as well. When we are encountered by other, “the I confronts itself for a moment like a You—and then it takes possession of itself and henceforth enters into relations in full consciousness.”²⁶ As said earlier, to become free is to take possession of oneself, and only in self-possession are we not tossed to and fro by the waves of compulsion, nor in bondage to the commands of society or anyone around us. Only in self-possession are we able to love, to offer ourselves as a gift to another. Granted, I nor Buber suggest that freedom ought to lead to selfishness. Freedom, nevertheless, necessitates this possibility, and herein lies the tragedy of freedom, for this understanding of freedom amounts to an attractive but ultimately sham freedom. In reality, when one understands freedom as selfishness, he will not only miss Buber’s point entirely, but he misses his entire self altogether. Only in communion (a state of mutual self-gift) is freedom actualized to its highest degree. Thus, the I-You communion is “a reciprocity of giving: you say You to it and give yourself to it; it says You to you and gives itself to you.”²⁷ In and from communion, no longer are we chained as a conscious object in a universe of other objects. Instead, we come to intimately know ourselves, enabling us to live freely rather than as a stranger unto ourselves.

²⁵ Buber, *I and Thou*, 80.

²⁶ Buber, *I and Thou*, 80.

²⁷ Buber, *I and Thou*, 84.

Admittedly, the moment of communion (the encounter) is not something we can abide in forever. As a matter of fact, Buber concedes that the I-You relationship “does not help you to survive.”²⁸ At the same time, the encounter does not come and go without effect. Rather, Buber claims that “for those who stand in it and behold in it, men emerge from their entanglement in busy-ness.... And now one can act, help, heal, educate, raise, redeem.”²⁹ Therefore, freedom is constitutive of communion, and this freedom gives life its substance and value. On this point, I must conclude with Buber’s own eloquence: “without It a human being cannot live. But whoever lives only with that is not human.”³⁰

²⁸ Buber, *I and Thou*, 84.

²⁹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 66.

³⁰ Buber, *I and Thou*, 85.

2. PRESENTATION

The beginning of the communion process is the presentation stage. Precisely, this stage is a mutual self-presentation that puts both subjects in a proper disposition for a Buberian encounter to occur, for one cannot nonchalantly enter into communion. Therefore, it is imperative that the presentation correctly occur as preparation for communion. It is in this stage that the seeds of the films' divergence are planted, for we see crucial differences in the actions of the mentors, Keating and Sean.

In the film *Dead Poets Society*, the presentation initiates on the boys' first day of Keating's class. With a whimsical whistle, Keating walks to the back of the room and straight out the door without a word. The boys look confused, but suddenly Keating pokes his head back through the door and directs them to follow. Looking at each other in curiosity, the boys follow Keating to the front of the school where he shares his most iconic teaching. Having his students stand before a trophy case full of awards and pictures of former Welton Academy students, Keating notes how similar they are to the boys in the pictures excluding one crucial difference—the boys in the pictures died long ago. Accordingly, Keating invites the boys to *memento mori* that they may *carpe diem*, to remember their death that they may seize the day. This is Keating's principal teaching.³¹ Admirably, Keating desires the boys to consider, perhaps for the first time, that there is more to life than getting good grades, going off to prestigious universities, attaining jobs that pay handsomely, all in order to achieve the ultimate goal of comfortable lives. While he does not suggest that any of these things are bad in and of themselves, Keating challenges the

³¹ *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir, Amazon Prime Video.

tradition that the boys have received by suggesting that life—one that is full and flourishing—is free, creative, and passionate. As such, he declares that poetry, especially Romantic poetry, is the ideal vehicle to learn this dogma. One can discern from the look in Neil’s eye that, upon hearing Keating’s proposal, he is extremely attracted to the possibility of this way of life.³² How could he not be, when his entire life has been dominated by the demands of his father? Arguably, Neil is being given permission to be himself, to pursue his desires, and to pursue an authentic life. In reality, however, it is more than merely permission, for Keating is inviting the boys, summoning them even, to consider a way of life they have never known before—the Way of the Poet. In a word, the poet is a creator who breathes life into situations. Although the Way of the Poet may not lead one to be a literal craftsman of verse, it does lead one to approach the world with a fundamental posture of creativity. The Way of the Poet invites one to take the world as he finds it and make it something more, something worthy of our best selves. In this context, we see the value of Keating’s *carpe diem*, for it encourages us to accept the responsibility of freedom, to breathe life into our best selves by experimenting with untested virtues, talents, experiences, etc.

For Keating, to be a man is to be a poet. In a scene shortly after their initial class, Keating calls the boys into a huddle in the middle of the classroom. “I have a little secret for you,” Keating says. Kneeling in the middle with the boys surrounding him, who eagerly await their teacher’s sage wisdom, Keating declares, “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.” Similar to their encounter with Keating’s *carpe diem*, there is a felt silence in the classroom, but a silence, nonetheless, filled with desirous anticipation. Keating continues: “Medicine, law, business, engineering—these are noble pursuits, and necessary to sustain life.”

³² *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir, Amazon Prime Video.

The camera zooms in on Keating's face, as he speaks the next lines with a spark in his eyes and a flare in his words: "But poetry, beauty, romance, love... these are what we stay alive for."³³

Thus, Keating encourages a poetic spirit in the boys by continuously proclaiming the superiority of the poetic way of life, and he gives the boys a chance to put this into action by giving them the option of referring to him as "Captain," an allusion to Walt Whitman's classic *O Captain! My Captain!*

Therefore, Keating has presented himself to the students as their "Captain" on their voyage into the realm of poetry. Is there anything wrong or necessarily false in Keating's teachings? From one perspective, Keating's teaching is admirable. He reveals to the boys how much of life they are missing out on, and he is counteracting the far too common ideal of contemporary Western society that cares solely for the maintenance of comfort, many times at the expense of an authentic existence. Thus, it is not in the *what* of Keating's teaching that is the issue but the *how* of his teaching, which stems from who he is as a person.

Nevertheless, Neil accepts his teacher's invitation to explore this new way of living. Unsurprisingly, since Keating thus far has offered little to no information about himself (a detail that is not unimportant), Neil searches for more information about his exciting but mysterious teacher. This search leads him to the old Welton annuals, and he finds the annual from Keating's senior year. Interestingly, Keating previously told the students that he was bullied for his interest in poetry during his time at Welton. In doing so, he presumably was attempting to empathize with the boys about the heavy burdens of Welton Academy. Even so, what Neil finds appears to be in opposition to Keating's testimony. He shares his discovery with his friends: Keating was captain of the varsity soccer team, editor of the school annual, "Cambridge-bound", voted as the

³³ *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir, Amazon Prime Video.

“Man Most Likely to Do Anything,” as well as a member of a group called “The Dead Poets Society.”³⁴ Apparently, what others thought of Keating contrasts greatly from his own self-image as “the intellectual equivalent of a 98-pound weakling” who had “copies of Byron” kicked in his face.³⁵

Of course, we want to be careful not to conjecture, but it is rather curious why Keating, first, gives his students a picture that contrasts greatly from the image his peers had of him, and second, why Keating shares so very little of himself with his students. Nonetheless, these points must be considered, as they are extremely relevant to the presentation stage. Going back to Buber, one must offer their “whole being” to the other for an encounter to occur. From the evidence offered by direction of the film, it appears that Keating is not offering himself in this way. We cannot presume to know why, if it is intentional, or even if he is cognizant of his own lack of awareness of his identity. Still, it is necessary to highlight that Keating is, for whatever reason, not giving his students, especially Neil, his whole self.

In any event, the boys are innocently unaware of this, so they venture to find Captain Keating to confront him with their discovery. “What is the Dead Poets Society?” Neil asks after handing Keating the annual. Looking up from reading the annual and turning to the boys with a soft but gleaming smile, Keating asks them if they can keep a secret before he divulges the identity of the secret society. Notably, the invitation to secrecy is enticing, for it appears to be an offering of intimacy. In reality, though, it often turns into a confidence game, which means that the one offering the secret gives nothing real or substantial away, in the hope that the other will respond by giving away something real about himself. Keating kneels down. The boys mimic their teacher. “The Dead Poets,” Keating reveals, “were dedicated to sucking the marrow out of

³⁴ *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir, Amazon Prime Video.

³⁵ *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir, Amazon Prime Video.

life.” He goes on to say how they would gather secretly in a cave in the forest near Welton’s campus to take turns reading their favorite poems, including poems they wrote themselves. “And in the enchantment of the moment, we’d let poetry work its magic.... We didn’t just read poetry. We let it drip from our tongues like honey. Spirits soared, women swooned, and gods were created.”³⁶ It is worth noting that in this scene, while he does not command or even ask the boys to reinstate the society, his descriptive language is persuasive in its undertones; therefore, once again, Keating encourages the boys to take up the poetic way. Even if he wasn’t trying to explicitly persuade the boys to follow him, Neil, the leader of the group, goes one step further in his acceptance of Keating’s invitation. Appearing stunned after Keating leaves the conversation, with a “light-bulb moment” stare that radiates excitement and conviction, Neil proposes to his group that they reconvene the Dead Poets Society. His friends accept his proposal, thus marking the beginning of Neil’s journey, as well as that of his friends, on the Way of the Poet.³⁷

The next part of the film portrays the developing relationship between Keating and his students, the majority of whom appear to be captivated by him. In fact, one iconic scene depicts Keating playing soccer with his students, and the boys lifting Keating above their heads to parade him around the field in an expression of loving devotion.³⁸ Are they boys simply having fun with their teacher? Without a doubt, there appears to be a genuine bond forming between Keating and his students. Nevertheless, however warmhearted and affectionate Keating feels towards his students and vice versa, this is *not* the initial formation of a communion bond. It is not and cannot be the beginning formation of communion because, as mentioned previously, there is a lack of genuine self-presentation from Keating. Keating offers them only his teaching,

³⁶ *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir, Amazon Prime Video.

³⁷ *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir, Amazon Prime Video.

³⁸ *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir, Amazon Prime Video.

which is an offering of an idea rather than an offering of self. Consequently, Neil accepts and pursues Keating's invitation to the poetic way of life, and Keating does nothing to stop him, for it seems that this is exactly what he desires, that is, to see Neil and the other students unleash their inner poet. Furthermore, it is not that he necessarily should have stopped Neil, but Keating rather ought to have gone *with* Neil. It is as if Keating is bringing the boys to the edge of a vast, unexplored wilderness and telling them to go explore for themselves. Therefore, this brings us to a crucial criticism of Keating: he fails to go *with* the boys along the path he invites them to take. In one sense he obviously invests in them during their classroom time through his unique and unorthodox lessons, such as combining sports and poetry or a field trip to the courtyard to take a stroll that teaches the lesson of conformity.³⁹ At the same time, there is an imbalance between Keating's invitation and what he provides for those who accept it. Because of this, the boys cannot know Keating all that well, nor can Keating know his students well either. In Buberian terms, Keating's methods prohibit him from genuinely encountering Neil and his friends, which prohibits the boys from encountering Keating as well, making communion impossible. Instead of presenting himself to enter into communion, Keating invites those students who have accepted his summons to simply become intoxicated together on the wine of romanticism. Therefore, Keating is treating Neil and the boys merely as recipients of his philosophy—as Its. In doing so, Keating presumes that Neil must adopt the same romantic approach to life that has presumably (though questionably), freed him in order for Neil to also be free. Ultimately, this presumption blinds Keating from encountering Neil as a You.

In contrast, Sean and Will in *Good Will Hunting* begin their relationship on a much different foot. Sean's approach, as a matter of fact, is markedly different from Keating's.

³⁹ *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir, Amazon Prime Video.

Namely, Sean does not try to enchant Will about what it means to live a good, meaningful life. Rather, he simply is interested in Will as Will understands himself, and he expresses this interest by asking him about his likes, dislikes, ideas, thoughts, etc. in attempts to build a relationship with him. Unlike Neil in *Dead Poets Society*, Will reacts negatively to Sean's attempts. He deflects nearly all of Sean's attempts with short, smug responses, which eventually turn into outright derision. But instead of reacting or walking away, Sean takes all of Will's abuse. That is, until Will insults Sean's wife, who has been dead for some time now. Will criticizes Sean's painting that depicts a man at sea swamped by the waves of a storm, and he surmises that it represents Sean in crisis. Perhaps the crisis, Will suggests, is that Sean married the wrong woman, evoking an immediate reaction out of Sean. Having discovered Sean's breaking point, Will continues to push the boundary by speaking insultingly of Sean's wife and his marriage, until, in a moment of pure authenticity, Sean grabs Will by the neck, pins him against the wall, and threatens to "end him" if he ever speaks negatively about his wife again.⁴⁰ Upon a first consideration, Sean's actions seem likely to ruin the potential relationship with Will.

Nevertheless, we can infer that this did not bother Will. In fact, I propose that this initial episode in Sean's office, in hindsight, *helped* rather than *hindered* the establishment of their relationship. Sean showed Will exactly who he is and what he is about. In fact, Sean confirms Will's hunch about how to get to him, and Will now knows where the line is and what will happen if he crosses it. But in contrast to the other therapists, who abandoned Will once he crossed their boundaries, Sean does not do so. He does not give into Will's antics, but he challenges Will. It is as if Sean is saying to Will in this confrontation, "I know the game you are trying to play, but it's not going to work on me."

⁴⁰ *Good Will Hunting*, directed by Gus Van Stant, Amazon Prime Video.

In reality, this is almost exactly what Sean later says to Will in their following session. After arriving at his office for their second meeting, Sean orders Will to follow him outside. The scene transitions to the two sitting on a park bench in Boston Common. Then, Sean proceeds to challenge Will. In this iconic scene, Sean readily affirms Will's intelligence, but also exposes him as a phony by (correctly) predicting that Will has never actually experienced any of the things that his intellectual prowess would suggest. "You're just a kid. You don't have the faintest idea of what you're talking about.... You've never been out of Boston." Turning in Will's direction to confirm his suspicion, we hear Will admit, "Nope." Sean then continues in a powerful monologue:

So, if I asked you about art, you'd probably give me the skinny on every art book ever written. Michelangelo? You know a lot about him. Life's work, political aspirations, him and the pope, sexual orientation—the whole works, right? But I'll bet you can't tell me what it smells like in the Sistine Chapel. You never actually stood there and looked up at that beautiful ceiling.... If I ask you about women, you'll probably give me a syllabus of your personal favorites. You may have even been laid a few times. But you can't tell me what it feels like to wake up next to a woman and feel truly happy. You're a tough kid. I ask you about war, you'd probably throw Shakespeare at me, right? 'Once more into the breach, dear friends.' But you've never been near one. You've never held your best friend's head in your lap and watch him gasp his last breath lookin' to you for help. If I asked you about love, you'd probably quote me a sonnet, but you've never looked at a woman and been totally vulnerable. Known someone that could level you with her eyes. Feelin' like God put an angel on Earth just for you, who could rescue you from the depths of Hell. And you wouldn't know what it's like to be her angel, to have that love for her

be there forever, through anything, through cancer. And you wouldn't know about sleepin' sittin' up in a hospital room for two months holding her hand, because the doctors could see in your eyes that the terms 'visiting hours' don't apply to you. You don't know about real loss 'cause that only occurs when you love something more than you love yourself. I doubt you've ever dared to love anybody that much. I look at you, I don't see an intelligent, confident man. I see a cocky, scared shitless kid. But you're a genius, Will. No one denies that. No one could possibly understand the depths of you. But you presume to know everything about me because you saw a painting of mine. You ripped my fuckin' life apart. You're an orphan, right? (Will nods his head in reply). Do you think I'd know the first thing about how hard your life has been, how you feel, who you are because I read *Oliver Twist*? Does that encapsulate you? (Will appears distressed). Personally, I don't give a shit about all that, because you know what? I can't learn anything from you I can't read in some fuckin' book. (Hopeful music fades in). Unless you wanna talk about you, who you are. And I'm fascinated. I'm in. But you don't wanna do that, do you sport? You're terrified of what you might say.... Your move chief.⁴¹

Thus, Sean reveals that while Will may know a lot about a lot of different things, never has he *known* something or someone in a truly intimate way, especially himself. But at the same time, Sean does not maliciously expose Will and leave it at that. Instead, Sean seemingly does what no one in Will's life has ever done: he challenges but does not abandon. Ironically, it is in Sean's departure that he leans in closer to Will, expressing his desire to be in relationship with Will but also confirming that this can only occur if Will reciprocates. Therefore, Sean's actions in these

⁴¹ *Good Will Hunting*, directed by Gus Van Stant, Amazon Prime Video.

two conversations set the stage for his and Will's future encounter, for Sean genuinely presents himself to Will. Will knows who Sean is and what he is about, at least as much as he can know at this point in their relationship. Sean, unlike Keating, is honest. Furthermore, he knows that he cannot force anything with Will, as he tells his Lambeau after a session in which Will refused to say a single word, "I can't talk first."⁴² Because of this crucial commitment on Sean's part, it creates the space for Will to, in turn, present himself to Sean, which he eventually does later on in the film by allowing Sean to see his deeply held fear of abandonment. Thus, the two successfully pass through the presentation stage and are on the road towards a communion-encounter.

From this point, we can see that while Keating and Sean both desire a relationship with their disciples, the two go about it in completely different ways. The former charms through a poetic ideal, whereas the latter engages in real, honest dialogue. One objection to this interpretation is that one should not expect Keating to attain the degree of intimacy of communion that Sean attains with Will due to the differences between teaching and counseling. Generally, there is an obvious disparity between the intimacy of a teacher-student relationship and a counselor-client relationship. Therefore, the objection could take the following form. Teachers should not aim for the intimacy strived for in a counselor-client relationship. But according to the communion model, the attainment of freedom requires this type of intimacy. Therefore, this interpretation expects Keating to do the impossible, so it is wrong to find fault with him.

I concede that the first premise of the argument above is true to a certain extent, for it is not the teacher's primary goal, unlike the counselor's, to uncover and heal emotional and

⁴² *Good Will Hunting*, directed by Gus Van Sant, Amazon Prime Video.

psychological trauma, which necessitates an extremely high degree of intimacy. At the same time, this premise is comprised of at least three misunderstandings. First, this premise presents an overly simplistic, pessimistic, and unsatisfactory understanding of the teacher-student relationship. What good teacher doesn't want to see their students mature intellectually and emotionally? What good teacher doesn't want to know his students well? What good teacher doesn't strive to make an impactful difference in the lives of their students? The point is clear: even if the intimacy shared between a student and teacher is different from that of a counselor and client, it does not follow that the teacher-student relationship is incapable of achieving the communion required for freedom. Thus, this occupation-based objection presents a false and cold understanding of the teaching profession that reduces it to a mere transfer of information tantamount to a data transfer. This understanding belongs to Buber's realm of It. Second, in spite of the different occupations, the two men occupy similar *roles* in the lives of their young men. Keating is appointed to teach Neil's class by the Welton administration. Sean is appointed by the court to counsel Will. Both are in a position to facilitate maturation, which is to say, facilitate a growth in freedom. Not only do they occupy this position, but it is also clear that the two men desire to see their disciples mature in freedom. Therefore, analyzing the characters of Keating and Sean in terms of their *role* rather than their occupation reveals their similarities. Third, this similar role is possible by virtue of their humanity. Specifically, it doesn't matter what one's job is, for most, if not all, occupations require interpersonal relationships. And if a job requires interpersonal relationships, then it requires communion. Thus, the common humanity shared between Keating and Sean transcends the technical differences of their two occupations.

In response, one may ask what, then, are we to expect of the teacher, in particular of Keating? To be clear, the fault with Keating does not lie in the content of his teaching, and there

are many admirable aspects of his teaching: the encouragement to make life “extraordinary,” the enduring value and relevance of poetry to the human race, and his creative pedagogy. Even more so, Keating is admirable in the fact that he does not succumb to the false understanding of teaching aforementioned that makes the profession cold and objectifying. Thus, I applaud his intention to move beyond this far-too common treatment of the profession through his desire to be more for his students. However, if this intention is not rightly acted upon, it makes void whatever goodness there is in the intention, and this is what, in fact, occurs in Keating’s case. That is, through his choice to move beyond the traditional expectations of the teacher, he takes on greater responsibility for his students but fails to bear this responsibility. Hence, he does not simply move beyond traditional pedagogical expectations, but he blurs lines and does not set necessary boundaries. These lines are blurred the moment he removes his students from the classroom on the first day of class. It is as if he is saying, “I am not like the other teachers. I desire more for you than they do.” In doing so, Keating takes on an immense responsibility for the students’ minds and hearts, yet he fails to adequately tend to the needs of the students. Specifically, he gives them a destination of the romantic and poetic ideal, especially to those to whom he entrusts the secret of the Dead Poets Society, without a roadmap. He communicates to his students “Go live this life that I enjoy!” rather than “Come, follow and walk with me.” Keating invites the students but withholds himself, and thus he does not share the risk inherent to communion. Even though much of what he says is good and more or less true, Keating fails because he does not go far enough. Additionally, Keating fails because he does not take into account the individual needs and desires of his students as much as he should. While there are instances in which Keating does acknowledge the different personalities of the boys and excluding the instance in which he helps Todd uncover his inner poet, he doesn’t appear to see

them as possessing genuinely personal and individual needs.⁴³ Rather, it is as if he believes that living out the poetic ideal of *carpe diem* will magically improve the life of each student regardless of his story, circumstances, wants, or needs.

Thus, the actions that take place in the presentation stage of communion set the course for the outcomes of the films. By failing to rightly accomplish the presentation, Keating and Neil are set up for future failure in terms of communion and opportunities at greater freedom. In contrast, the actions of Sean and Will in this first stage create the conditions for their eventual communion and the attainment of greater freedom.

⁴³ *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir, Amazon Prime Video.

3. COMMUNION

In the stage of presentation, the active elements are the desire to see and be seen by the other. What occurs in communion, however, is more than mutual sight. As Buber says, the world of the I-You communion is one of participation. Thus, in the communion stage we move beyond seeing into participation in the life of the other through an encounter, and in participating, we become (more) authentic versions of our former selves.

Because there is an impoverished presentation on the part of John Keating, communion never takes shape in *Dead Poets Society* between him and Neil. Thus, we cannot positively describe a moment of communion. Instead, we are forced to examine those times in which it *could* have occurred. There are two scenes in particular that bear potential for communion but never come to fruition.

First, and perhaps the more important of the two, is Neil's visit to Keating's office to talk with him about his aspirations of becoming an actor. The two quickly delve into the crux of the matter—Neil's father. Neil expresses how he feels that he is completely unable to stand up to his father and tell him his desires. Wisely, Keating asks Neil if he has ever told his father about his desire to act in a confident manner. Neil admits that he has not, so Keating encourages him to be brave and talk to his father, even if it seems like it will go nowhere.⁴⁴

What is wrong with this interaction? On the surface, this seems to have been a perfectly appropriate interaction between student and teacher, and, in one sense, it is. The issue with the conversation, however, is that Keating does not go far enough. In a word, Keating could have offered much more. Neil does not need another piece of advice, teaching, or idea. Neil needs to

⁴⁴ *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir, Amazon Prime Video.

be seen fully. Neil needs acknowledgement of his wounds from his relationship (or lack thereof) with his father. Neil needs communion. But Keating seemingly does not want communion; he wants to inspire his students at no risk to himself. This is phony and careless on his part if he will not provide what the boys need in order to attain the freedom he is teaching them about. As such, Keating deflects Neil's attempts at going deeper. He asks Keating, "You can go anywhere. You can do anything. How can you stand being here?" Significantly, Neil's comments reflect his view of his teacher: Keating, in Neil's mind, is god-like, capable of anything with no limitations. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Neil questions Keating's choice to teach at Welton Academy. Keating's response? "Because I love teaching. I don't want to be anywhere else."⁴⁵ I am very happy, Mr. Keating, that you love what you do, but that isn't what Neil asked. Why Welton Academy of all places? Why come back to your alma mater, the place you once called "Hellton," the place where you were supposedly bullied for your love of poetry? Why graduate from Cambridge to come teach high school English? If you desire the boys to be poets, why don't you yourself go be one?

Neil continues, telling Keating how his father is forcing him quit the play, and he sheepishly laughs it off, even though it is obvious that this is no laughing matter. He is, in fact, very distressed by this. "Acting's everything to me," Neil tells Keating. This is odd, since this is Neil's first time acting. Therefore, this statement is more than somewhat naïve of him to say, yet Keating remains silent. If Keating cares about Neil like he seems to, he would do good to remind him that acting is still very new, fresh, intoxicating, and relatively unknown to him. It is definitely not the sort of pursuit to draw a line in the sand to defend, even if acting proves to be as important for Neil as he currently thinks. Actually, Keating appears to take no issue with

⁴⁵ *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir, Amazon Prime Video.

Neil's assessment of his situation. Next, Neil reproduces his father's logic for being so tough on him: "I can see his point. We're not a rich family like Charlie's... but he's planning the rest of my life for me, and he's never asked me what I want." Keating responds: "Have you ever told your father what you just told me? About your passion for acting, you ever showed him that?" "I can't... I can't talk to him this way," Neil admits in defeat. Then, Keating declares to Neil, "Then, you're acting for him, too. You're playing the part of the dutiful son. I know this sounds impossible, but you have to talk to him. You have to show him who you are, what your heart is." With his head down, tears beginning to well in his eyes, Neil responds, "I know what he'll say. He'll tell me that acting's a whim, and that I should forget it, that they're counting on me. He'll just tell me to put it out of my mind, for my own good." "You are not an indentured servant," Keating counters. "If it's not a whim for you, you prove it to him by your conviction and your passion. You show him that, and if he still doesn't believe you, well, by then, you'll be out of school, and you can do anything you want."

Once more, much of what Keating says here is true. Neil ought to learn to be honest with his father. Neil is freer than he thinks he is, and he will soon be even more so, once he is done with school. Keating, though, does not provide nuance to their analysis of Neil's situation, yet he could have done so in multiple ways. He could have told Neil that his father, at the very least, seems to want what he thinks is best for his son, even if his motives and way of going about it are impure. He could have given Neil the perspective that, even if it doesn't work out for Neil to perform in the play, this isn't the end of the world. He could have told Neil that he can still find an outlet for his poetic spirit. He could have told Neil that one does not "seize the day" by risking one's life for what may be only a whim. Instead of this, Keating essentially sends Neil with an "either/or" understanding of his situation that, in Neil's mind, is tantamount to a life-or-death

scenario (which we eventually see is how Neil literally understands his situation to be). Because the play is the following night, Neil ponders talking with his father beforehand and asks Keating, “Isn’t there an easier way?” “No,” Keating says. Laughing, presumably in attempts to numb his pain and inner distress, Neil says, “I’m trapped.” “No, you’re not,” Keating replies. The scene abruptly ends.⁴⁶

“I am trapped.” “No, you’re not.” Again, Keating makes a true statement, but he fails to expound upon this golden opportunity. Neil asks if there is an easier way. Without a doubt, he needs to speak with his father, but why does Keating suggest that it must be this incredibly painful, nearly insurmountable task? Why doesn’t he help Neil to see that he is putting artificial pressure on himself and his situation? Or why can’t he offer to speak *with* Neil to his father? Would it be inappropriate for Keating to offer his help? Would he be enabling Neil to continue putting off responsibility? Some may answer affirmatively, but this is not important, for even if this is the case, Keating still could have given him more direction than he does, such as anecdotal evidence from his own life. Keating, however, offers nothing like this. Is Keating here attempting to live vicariously through Neil? Has Keating ever expressed his contempt for rules, authority, processes to *his* superiors? Has he ever engaged in the kind of difficult conversation with his *own* father that he insists that Neil must now engage in? We can never know because of how little the film reveals Keating’s past, but a vicarious motivation is undoubtedly a possibility. Thus, this scene is an excellent illustration of Keating’s failure to accompany Neil after undoubtedly pointing him the way he ought to go. Rather than bear the responsibility that comes with the trust Neil has given him, Keating abandons. It is obvious that Neil is enslaved to fear of his father. He has been deeply hurt, and if he is to be freed in the way that Keating has been

⁴⁶ *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir, Amazon Prime Video.

teaching him, the freedom which Neil desires, these wounds must be healed. Liberation can never occur by solely embracing an idea, teaching, or philosophy, no matter how profound. Thus, the only way to freedom is to embrace and be embraced by the other. The only way to freedom is by way of communion. And in this mutual embracement, we become more aware of ourselves, which is the first step towards freedom.

In the second scene, Neil tells Keating that he spoke with his father about acting in the play. Neil tells him that his father was angry, but that he is allowing him to continue. “Keep up the schoolwork,” Neil says quoting his father. Keating appears to know that something is amiss from the troubled and unsatisfied look on his face.⁴⁷ Keating’s suspicions are probably correct because, though we do not know for certain, it is implied later that Neil actually never speaks with his father, for he appears ghastly surprised when his father arrives at his play.⁴⁸ Neil instead hopes to get away with it, since his father will apparently be out of town. Nonetheless, Keating does not challenge Neil’s story. He does not engage. We must ask, therefore: why does Neil feel compelled to lie to Keating, the man to whom he has given an incredible amount of trust? Quite frankly, it is because he does not know any better. If he cannot tell the truth to his father, then why should we expect that he would be able to do so with Keating, who has become in Neil’s heart like a second father? More importantly, why does Keating *allow* Neil to lie to him? This is in direct contrast to Sean, who unambiguously draws boundaries for Will. An invitation to communion requires demonstrating one’s own self-worth, which is done by setting personal boundaries. Keating, though, provides no such boundaries, further minimizing the opportunity of an I-You communion with Neil.

⁴⁷ *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir, Amazon Prime Video.

⁴⁸ *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir, Amazon Prime Video.

In any event, Neil goes on to perform in the play, but he does so only under the impression that his father will not find out. In other words, he does so fearfully. Undoubtedly, Neil doesn't need someone to *charm* him but one who is *with* him, someone to lovingly but firmly challenge the ways in which he needs to grow. Hence, Neil needs communion, for communion is the space in which this kind of challenging necessarily occurs. For communion to occur, we are required to mutually embrace each other's faults. When we no longer bear the burden of our faults and hardships alone, we are free to pursue the heart's desires, as we no longer are chained to the limitations of our imperfections. Quite simply, we are free to be.

Moving on to *Good Will Hunting*, this film has one of the most illustrious examples of an I-You communion in film. Will has come to Sean's office for one of their last therapy sessions. Sean tells him that he will soon send his file off to the judge for evaluation. Motioning to the file, Will asks Sean, "Have you had any, uh, experience with that?" "In 20 years of counseling, yeah, I've seen some pretty awful shit," Sean replies. "No, I mean...do you have any *experience* with that?" Will inquires again. "Personally? Yeah, I have," Sean admits. Sean proceeds to tell Will his "experience with that," how he himself had an alcoholic father, and how he would provoke him whenever he got home to protect his mother and brother from his father's abuse. Will then elaborates on his experience, how his foster father would give him the choice to be beaten with a belt, a stick, or a wrench. He would choose the wrench, he tells Sean. Sean, obviously confused, asks Will why, to which Will eloquently responds, "'Cause fuck him, that's why." Having been completely vulnerable with each other, Sean, motioning once more to Will's file, initiates the most important moment of Will's life thus far:

Sean: Hey, Will, I don't know a lot. But you see this? (Motions to his file). All this shit?
It's not your fault.

Will: (Looking down dismissively). Yeah, I know that.

Sean: Look at me, son. It's not your fault.

Will: (Shrugging). I know.

Sean: No. It's not your fault.

Will: (Confused and uncomfortable) I know.

Sean: No, no you don't. (Moves in closer to Will). It's not your fault.

Will: (Moving away from Sean's proximity). I know.

Sean: It's not your fault.

Will: All right.

Sean: (Moving even closer to Will). It's not your fault.... It's not your fault.

Will: (Looking down, tears beginning to well, avoiding Sean's gaze). Don't fuck with me.

Sean: It's not your fault.

Will: Don't fuck with me, all right? (Forcefully pushes Sean away). Don't fuck with me,

Sean! Not you. (Begins to cry more).

Sean: It's not your fault.

Will: (Sobs).

Sean: It's not your fault.

Will, sobbing, embraces Sean, allowing light to shine on his pain that has long been buried in the darkness of his heart. "Oh God! Oh God! I'm so sorry. Oh God!" Will exclaims. The camera cuts to another angle, showing completely Will and Sean's intimate embrace, slowly zooming out

before stopping, allowing the audience to remain with the two men in their moment of communion.⁴⁹

This scene is an incredibly illuminative depiction of Martin Buber's encounter. For the first time in his life, Will not only allows himself to be seen but to be accepted and embraced in spite of his pain and brokenness. The only way he is able to do so is through Sean offering the same opportunity for Will, which creates the space for communion. And in their embrace, Sean is unashamed of Will's shame, permitting Will to heal from his wounds and break his bondage to them.

Notably, Sean knows that initiating this conversation could make or break his relationship with Will. In reality, he could get hurt in the process, which is seen when Will pushes and threatens him. Yet Sean continues, "It's not your fault...it's not your fault...it's not your fault." In this breakthrough moment, Will finally sees himself through the eyes of the other. He sees that he is, in fact, a person, a subject who has been deeply wounded through no fault of his own. Will realizes that he has opened himself up to a degree for Sean to see all of his mess, yet he does not run away or abandon him. In freedom, Will allows himself to be received in Sean's embrace and grieves these wounds that have enslaved him to fear for his entire life. Will finally lets himself be loved. This scene of embrace genuinely captures the essence of communion. The two have grown to know each other intimately, seeing both the good and the bad, yet they press on. They press on and enter into communion, the state of mutual subjective embrace.

⁴⁹ *Good Will Hunting*, directed by Gus Van Stant, Amazon Prime Video.

4. POSTCOMMUNION

“Man becomes an I through a You... the I confronts its detached self for a moment like a You—and then it takes possession of itself and henceforth enters into relations in full consciousness.”⁵⁰ The event of communion gives birth to post-communion. The encounter sows the seeds of communion, and the growth is the state of post-communion. Namely, the seed of communion grows into greater and richer freedom, for the encounter-borne communion empowers one to “full consciousness,” as Buber puts it; or better yet, full self-possession and mastery, enabling the greatest freedom of all that enhances and enriches the already possessed freedom—the freedom to gift oneself.

Unfortunately, as this analysis has twice demonstrated, this freedom does not occur for Neil and Keating in *Dead Poets Society*. At first glance, it appears that Neil has attained some degree of freedom as a result of his time with Keating, for he stands his ground against his father by choosing to perform in the play. Nevertheless, this act is done, not in freedom, but fear, since he believes his father to be unaware of his decision. A more appropriate interpretation of Neil’s act is that he, perhaps, performed it in a dream. This interpretation is underscored by the fact that Neil plays the trickster fairy Puck in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. There are two things worth noting here. First, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* centers on the two worlds of the fantastical, fairy-inhabited forest and the mundane town of mortals. In the same vein, Neil’s situation is a tension between the two worlds of drama and reality, the two worlds of Neil’s dreams and his concrete circumstances. Second, Neil is not the only character in this film to play the part of Puck. In the play, Puck has a magic potion that causes sleeping mortals to fall in love

⁵⁰ Buber, *I and Thou*, 80.

with whatever or whoever they see next, which is exactly what Keating has done to Neil. Neil is infatuated with poetry and acting, even though he is still very new to it. Keating allows Neil to believe, falsely, that he seizes the day by acting, contrary to his father's wishes.

At the performance, which Keating and the other "Dead Poets" come to watch, Neil seems to be on top of the world, finally doing what he was born to do. While backstage, though, Neil observes his father walk into the back of the auditorium, causing an immediate descent from joy to panic in Neil's demeanor. Neil's façade of freedom crumbles, but he bravely manages to finish the play. Importantly, Neil looks straight at his father, as he declares Puck's famous, final words:

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 'scape 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 hands, if we be friends,
And Robin shall restore amends.⁵¹

In reality, “Neil the Actor” exists only in his dreams. Accordingly, these final lines are the beginning of Neil’s surrender to his father. “Dad, this is only a dream. None of this is real. Don’t be angry with me,” is the implicit message Neil speaks to his father through these final lines.

The message, however, is poorly received. Rather than congratulate his son, Mr. Perry remains in the back, sending someone else to fetch his disobedient son. In the next shot, Neil follows his father with his head down in defeat. Unlike his father, Keating and the other boys wait outside for Neil, to encourage, affirm, and celebrate his performance. But before he can say too much, Mr. Perry prohibits Keating from speaking to his son. Keating silently relents from his praise, stopping Knox, a fellow “Dead Poet,” from making the situation “worse than it [already] is.”⁵² In the car, Neil looks back over his shoulder to his friends and Keating, unbeknownst to them that this will be the last time they see him. The scene ends with a foreboding profile of Keating, as he is seemingly aware that something is gravely wrong. Notably, this is a side of Keating we have not seen the entire movie, perhaps why the shot shows only half his face, symbolizing the darker side of the romantic “freedom” that he has offered the boys. Keating declares earlier in the movie that “only in their dreams can men be truly free, ‘twas always thus, and always thus shall be.”⁵³ In this final interaction with Neil, however, it appears that Keating catches a glimpse of the shadow side of his teaching, of the oft unforeseen consequences of the passionate, uninhibited freedom that he has championed for seemingly the majority of his life.

⁵¹ Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, V.I.440–455.

⁵² *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir, Amazon Prime Video.

⁵³ *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir, Amazon Prime Video.

Back at home, Neil endures his father's attacks. Not any physical attacks, but verbal and emotional attacks through his absence of love, inability to listen, and refusal to even attempt to understand his son. "We're trying to understand why it is that you insist on defying us," Mr. Perry tells Neil. "But whatever the reason, we're not going to let you ruin your life. Tomorrow I'm withdrawing you from Welton and enrolling you in Braden Military School. You're going to Harvard, and you're gonna be a doctor." Here, Mr. Perry draws the boundaries that Keating has disastrously encouraged the boys to ignore or disrespect. The boundaries set by Mr. Perry are for Neil's own good, even if they are misguided or harshly drawn. But Neil fails to understand this, so he responds, "But that's ten more years. Father, that's a lifetime!" "Oh, stop it! Don't be so dramatic. You make it sound like a prison term." Mr. Perry pauses before continuing his tirade. "You don't understand Neil. You have opportunities that I never even dreamt of, and I am not going to let you waste them!" It is worth noting that at this point Mr. Perry's message to Neil is similar to that of Keating's. Although they communicate this in different ways, and the explicit content of their message differs, the meta-message is the same: "Your life will not be all that it can be unless you do what I tell you. Do not waste it." Thus, it is evident that both Mr. Perry and Keating treat Neil as an extension of themselves, as the one who will vicariously fulfill their own dreams. Immediately, filled with desperation, Neil rises, exclaiming, "But I've got to tell you what I feel!" This is *the* critical moment of the entire film. Mr. Perry has shown his cards, revealing with full force his misguided attempts to see his son succeed. His desire to see his son succeed is not bad, but for Tom Perry, this desire is one that must be met only according to his preconceived notions of success, and it must be met at all costs, even the cost of alienating his one and only son. Mr. Perry quickly shouts back, "What? What? Tell me what you feel!" Neil sinks into silence. The inability to respond is deafening. Mr. Perry continues, "Is it more of this-

this acting business? Because you can forget that.... What?" Neil, unable to stand up to his father, shrugs his shoulders and responds weakly, "Nothing."

"Nothing." This word is not only a resignation of defeat but also reveals the lie that Neil believes: "I am prohibited by my father from feeling anything." Moreover, it also manifests Neil's understanding of himself, his self-value, or rather the lack thereof. He is nothing. For Neil, if he cannot act, then he will feel and be nothing. Neil sinks back down into his chair, afraid to look up at his father. Mr. Perry sighs, "Nothing?" taking a short pause, "Well let's go to bed then." He storms out of the room. Neil's mother comes over to "console" him. In reality, she doesn't see him. She stands behind him, and rather than acknowledge her son's comments about his acting—"I was good. I was really good"—she simply tells him, "Go on and get some sleep," and walks away.⁵⁴

The scene transitions to Neil in his room. He sees his pajamas and toiletries already prepared for him in the same fashion of his entire life. With the shot only showing his hand, Neil reaches to grab the pajamas but then stops himself. The camera angle turns and shows Neil's silhouette on the wall, illuminated from the soft moonlight coming through the window. Seeing only Neil's shadow, and with the Puck crown in central view, Neil's shadow takes off his shirt, and then immediately Neil's actual hand comes into view and grabs the crown. This shot further emphasizes the tension in Neil's life: he can choose to live in his dreams but only be a mere shadow in the world, or choose to live a real, concrete existence but risk his dreams being unfulfilled. Walking over to the window, Neil opens both sides of it, bracing the chilling, winter breeze. On one side of the bifurcated window is Neil, while on the other side is a globe, symbolizing Neil's feelings of alienation with the world. Neil places the crown on his forehead,

⁵⁴ *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir, Amazon Prime Video.

closes his eyes, and slowly lowers his head. Momentarily, this shot of Neil with his crown of branches and leaves resembles the image of Jesus of Nazareth with his crown of thorns, who hangs on the cross with his head lowered, after crying out in abandonment to God whom he calls “Father.” This shot emphasizes the excruciating psychological and emotional pain Neil endures from the pain of abandonment of his father.

Afterwards, we see the doorknob slowly turn and Neil emerge from his room no longer wearing his crown. Walking down the stairs, the light is low, and it appears as if Neil is merely a shadow walking down the stairs. He makes his way into his father’s study with a key in hand. Unlocking a drawer, Neil pulls out a revolver wrapped in cloth. The scene pans out as Neil sits shirtless at the desk, hand on the gun. Immediately, the eerie cry from the digeridoo playing in the background stops, and the scene cuts to Tom Perry waking up in a sudden fright. He and his wife dialogue:

Mr. Perry: “What was that?”

Mrs. Perry: “What?”

Mr. Perry: “That sound.”

Mrs. Perry: “What sound?”

Mr. Perry turns on the lamp. “Tom? What is it? What’s wrong?” Mrs. Perry worries. Mr. Perry, without giving a word to his wife, goes to Neil’s room. Looking for his son, he proclaims into the dark room, “Neil?” He finds only the two sides of the window open, with Neil’s crown resting on the snow-dusted ledge. Mr. Perry rushes out of the room to walk downstairs. “I’ll look outside,” we hear Mrs. Perry exclaim. Mr. Perry then enters the study, turns the light on, and we see a smoky haze emanating from a corner of the room. Mr. Perry smells the smoke, and a look of horror emerges on his face. Loud string music fades in. Mr. Perry looks down, sees the gun,

and then a hand lying on the ground behind the desk. “No!” we hear extended over several seconds, as the scene depicts Neil’s father running over to his son in slow motion. We discover that Neil has committed suicide. The camera observes Mr. Perry through a cracked door, as if we are spying this tragic moment. “Oh Neil! Oh my God! Oh, my son! My poor son!” he shouts. Mrs. Perry enters the room. “Oh my God. Oh, no, no.” In denial, she repeats hysterically amidst rising sobs, “He’s alright! He’s alright! He’s alright! He’s alright....” The scene concludes with the two parents, clutching each other in sorrow over the body of their dead son.⁵⁵

Thus, the film begins with a hopeful opportunity for Neil but ends in despair and self-alienation of the most acute degree. The most tragic part about his death is that one conversation could have prevented it, a conversation in which Neil learns to see his situation in a not so fateful light. Still, he believed himself to be trapped, in bondage to the will of his father. Therefore, the only way Neil thought to escape a life of slavery is to escape life altogether.

Neither the freedom Neil Perry could have attained nor his death lie on any one person’s shoulders. The film seems to suggest that the most fault is due to Neil’s biological father, Mr. Perry. By never seeing his son as a person—as a You—Neil never knew himself as such. At the same time, there is some fault on the part of Keating, who awakened Neil’s desire for freedom without teaching him the full scope of what this freedom entails. It is arguable whether Keating is aware of the responsibility that comes with freedom, for rather than prepare his students for the too often grim and suffering aspects of life, he paints over these aspects with the brush of passionate romanticism. Accordingly, Neil and his peers seemingly fail to become independent thinkers. Aside from Neil and Charlie Dalton, who is expelled, the other “Dead Poets” participate in an act of defiance in order to show their loyalty to Captain Keating. In the scene

⁵⁵ *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir, Amazon Prime Video.

that marks the conclusion of the film, Mr. Keating returns to his classroom to gather his remaining belongings. As he leaves, Todd stands up to defend and insure closure with Keating. “Mr. Keating! They made everybody sign it!” Todd says, referring to the document that implicated Keating with Neil’s death and resulted in his termination. In attempts to quell the outburst, Mr. Nolan, the headmaster of Welton, demands Keating leave immediately. As Keating continues his departure, however, Todd rebels once again. Standing on top of his desk, he proclaims to Keating, “O Captain! My Captain!” One by one, the other “Dead Poets” follow suit, further inspiring some of their other classmates to act the same. While Mr. Nolan shouts in panic, commanding the boys to stop, Keating proudly looks at his students, saying, “Thank you, boys,” before the film concludes.⁵⁶

While in one sense, this scene could demonstrate that Keating has taught them how to live freely, since they courageously stand up to the authority of the Welton Administration. Nonetheless, is it an optimal use of one’s freedom to proclaim one’s loyalty to a man who is obviously at fault? Further, can the boys’ actions even be deemed genuinely authentic and free, since most just conform to Todd? Finally, does Keating genuinely want the boys to be free—to possess themselves as Buber describes—or does he simply want to duplicate himself in his disciples? While his motives could never be anything more than conjecture, the empirical results of his teaching suggest the latter. He has, in fact, reproduced young admirers of Walt Whitman like himself. And Neil has moved beyond anything Keating has ever done by literally dying for his passionately held beliefs in an expression of utmost romanticism. In the end, it is evident that Neil, and by his extension, his friends, was not free. Because Neil was never encountered by Keating, he fails to see himself as a You, as a subject, and therefore fails to be free.

⁵⁶ *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir, Amazon Prime Video.

At this point, the contrast between *Dead Poets Society* and *Good Will Hunting* has reached its extreme in terms of the principal relationship of the film, as the latter ends in hope. From his communion with Sean, Will is finally free to see himself not as the one at fault for all his pain, but as one who is worthy of love by another in spite of his wounds. In addition, Will is free to see beyond his own self, his own pain, and he awakes to the reality that life is far more than he ever could have imagined. In the scenes following the moment of communion with Sean, Will is shown in deep thought during his commute aboard the train. But this time it is different. He looks out at the world through the windows of the train with longing, aware his life has changed. Back at home, Will stares at a lightbulb with hopeful music rising in the background, suggesting that he has had an essential realization.⁵⁷ The realization is this: will he take hold of this freedom that has risen from his communion with Sean?

The following scenes reveal that Will answers with a resounding “yes.” First, Will enters a large corporate building in downtown Boston. We learn that he is interviewing for a job set up for him by Professor Lambeau, which emphasizes Will’s acceptance of responsibility. Later, Will returns to Sean’s office for their final session. “Which one did you take?” Sean asks. Will: “I was over at McNeil. It’s one of the jobs the professor set me up with.” Sean gently pushes into Will, “Is that what you want?” Will responds, “Yeah, you know, I think so.” Notably, this conversation demonstrates the healing that arises from communion. For the first time in his adult life, Will takes initiative to do something responsible, something that does not involve drinking, having sex, fighting, or immaturely flexing his intellect. In a word, it is an act flowing from maturation. Furthermore, he takes a step in following his desires, or, at the very least, what he thinks they are. “Well, good for you. Congratulations,” Sean tells Will. Sean, glancing up at the

⁵⁷ *Good Will Hunting*, directed by Gus Van Stant, Amazon Prime Video.

clock, looks back at Will with a gentle smile: “Time’s up.” “So that’s—so that’s it? So, we’re done?” Will asks. “Yeah, that’s it. You’re done. You’re a free man.”⁵⁸ Two things here. First, Will and Sean aren’t done because, by virtue of their communion, they can never be done, for as Buber says, communion gives us “intimations of eternity.”⁵⁹ In other words, the relationship that Sean and Will have entered into transcends their spatiotemporal circumstances.

Therefore, their communion will remain with them and, in fact, propel them forward. On the second point of Sean’s comment, Will is in fact a “free man” but in more than one sense. He is a free man in that he is finished with his court mandated therapy sessions. More than that, though, he is now, in the core of his identity, both of these words: Will is free, and Will is a man. Will is no longer the troubled boy as he was previously referred to by Sean and Lambeau. In his actions with Will, Sean has fatherly bestowed upon Will his manhood, and from this, flows the freedom to cultivate a flourishing life. Importantly, Sean also is freed as a result of their communion. In reference to a conversation the two had earlier, Sean tells Will, “Yeah, you know, I figured I’m just gonna... put my money back on the table and see what kind of cards I get.” In other words, not only has their communion healed Will, it also has healed Sean’s wounds from the death of his wife. Rather than continue to live in sorrow and fear, Sean gains the courage to truly live again through Will’s love for him. Consequently, he advises Will, “You do what’s in your heart, son. You’ll be fine.” Looking up at each other one last time, they embrace: “Thank you, Sean,” and Sean: “Thank you, Will,” as both acknowledge the inner transformation that has occurred as a result of their communion love. In their final moment, Sean stops Will as he begins to walk out of his office: “Hey,” causing Will to turn, “Good luck, son.” In a mutual gaze of love, Will receives his blessing, then walks away, leaving Sean to watch the

⁵⁸ *Good Will Hunting*, directed by Gus Van Stant, Amazon Prime Video.

⁵⁹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 84.

man who has become his son walk up the stairs out into the world, rising from bondage and death into freedom and life.⁶⁰

With a flare of redemption, the story does not end there. The next scene depicts Will celebrating his 21st birthday with his friends. In order to surprise Will, his friends worked together to provide Will with his own car for his new job. Thankful and joking with his friends, as he admires his old, tattered, beat up car, Will exclaims, “It’s the ugliest fuckin’ car I’ve ever seen in my life,” with a wide smile across his face. Shortly after, they pop open the hood to look at the engine. “Me and Bill built this engine ourselves,” Chucky says. “It’s a good car. The engine’s good. Engine’s good,” Bill declares.⁶¹ This scene is symbolically important, for the car comes to Will after he takes responsibility to accept a job in which he can allow his talents to shine. Thus, the car is a symbolic fruit of Will’s newfound freedom, and it illustrates how one act of freedom begets greater freedom. Will is free to go wherever he wants. At the same time, the car is also symbolic of Will himself. On the outside, the car is rough and beat up. The car obviously has gone through a lot, much like Will’s rough exterior and the scars he carries with him. But on the inside, the car possesses a newly built engine, restored by his friends with intentionality and love. Therefore, as the restored engine is to the rough exterior of the car, so, too, is Will’s restored heart to his own rough exterior.

Back at his office, Sean is shown packing up in preparation for his sabbatical. Gerry Lambeau enters his office, with an apologetic look on his face. Gerry begins, “Sean, I um—” “Me too, Gerry,” Sean says, masterfully anticipating his apology and simultaneously offering his own. The two begin discussing Sean’s travel plans, with Sean telling Gerry’s that he’ll return in time for their class reunion. “Why don’t you come? I’ll buy you a drink,” Sean tells Gerry.” “The

⁶⁰ *Good Will Hunting*, directed by Gus Van Stant, Amazon Prime Video.

⁶¹ *Good Will Hunting*, directed by Gus Van Stant, Amazon Prime Video.

drinks at those things are free,” Gerry replies. “I know Gerry. I was being ironical,” Sean retorts back, evoking a genuine, hearty laugh from Gerry, the kind of laugh that emanates from deep friendship with another. In actuality, this is precisely what this scene demonstrates—the reconciliation of Sean and Gerry’s friendship. This scene, like the prior scene, demonstrates the fruits of freedom borne from communion. In summary, because Sean is healed, he is able to receive Gerry in his acknowledgement of how he has failed as a friend and offer himself, too, in acknowledgement of the way that he also has failed, resulting in reconciliation and freedom in their friendship. Once again, freedom begets greater freedom. “How about a drink right now?” Gerry asks. “Yeah. It’s a good idea. Come on. This one’s on me,” Sean says, as the two walk out and up the stairs, the same path Will ascended earlier, together as old friends.⁶²

Finally comes the film’s crucial finale. Sean is in his apartment, packing his belongings for the adventure he will soon embark upon. The camera angle shifts to outside the apartment, where Will drives up in his new car, to drop a note off at Sean’s house. He looks at Sean through the window as he drops the note in the mailbox and walks back to his car, as if part of him desires to stay and be with Sean but at the same time knowing that freedom calls him onward. Will drives off.

The scene cuts to Chucky, Bill, and Morgan on their way to pick up Will as they always do. This scene takes on much greater significance in light of an earlier scene that depicts Chucky and Will discussing the future:

Chucky: “So, uh, when are you done with those meetings?”

Will: “I think the week after I’m 21.”

Chucky: “They gonna hook ya up with a job or what?”

⁶² *Good Will Hunting*, directed by Gus Van Stant, Amazon Prime Video.

Will: “Yeah, fuckin’ sit in a room and do long division for the next 50 years.”

Chucky: “Nah, probably make some nice bank though.”

Will: “I’m gonna be a fuckin’ lab rat.”

Chucky: “Better than this shit. Way outta here.”

Will: “What do I want a way outta here for? I mean, I’m gonna fuckin’ live here the rest of my life. You know, be neighbors. You know, have little kids. Fuckin’ take ‘em to Little League together up Foley Field.”

Chucky: “Look, you’re my best friend, so don’t take this the wrong way. But in 20 year if you’re still livin’ here, comin’ over to my house to watch the Patriots games, still workin’ construction, I’ll fuckin’ kill ya. That’s not a threat. That’s a fact. I’ll fuckin’ kill ya.”

Will: “What the fuck are you talkin’ about?”

Chucky: “Look, you got something none of us have—”

Will: “Oh, come on! Why is it always this? I fuckin’ owe it to myself to do this or that. What if I don’t want to?”

Chucky: “No, no, no. Fuck you. You don’t owe it to yourself. You owe it to me, ‘cause tomorrow I’m gonna wake up and I’ll be 50, and I’ll still be doin’ this shit. That’s all right. That’s fine.” (Will begins to look down, aware of where Chucky is going with the conversation). “I mean, you’re sittin’ on a winnin’ lottery ticket. You’re too much of a pussy to cash it in, and that’s bullshit. ‘Cause I’d do fuckin’ anything to have what you got. So would any of these fuckin’ guys. It’d be an insult to us if you’re still here in 20 years. Hangin’ around here is a fuckin’ waste of your time.”

Will: “You don’t know that.”

Chucky: “I don’t?”

Will: “No. You don’t know that.”

Chucky: “Oh, I don’t know that. Let me tell you what I do know. Every day I come by your house, and I pick you up. We got out and have a few drinks and few laughs, and it’s great. You know what the best part of my day is? It’s about for 10 seconds: from when I pull up to the curb and when I get to your door. ‘Cause I think maybe I’ll get up there and I’ll knock on the door and you won’t be there. No ‘good-bye,’ no ‘see ya later.’” No nothing. You just left. I don’t know much, but I know that.”⁶³

With this context, Chucky arrives at Will’s house, pulls up to the curb, walks to the door and knocks. “Will!” he yells. Silence. Chucky knocks again, “Will?” Still no response. He looks in the window and is shocked at what he sees: a vacant room. Chucky takes a step back, shocked and sad that his friend is gone; but because his friend is gone, he smiles, casually walks back to the car, shrugs his shoulders to the other guys, and says simply, “He’s not there.”⁶⁴

Back at his apartment, Sean walks downstairs to the street and finds the note. He stands in the doorway, and with Will narrating as he reads, the note says: “Sean, if the professor calls about that job, just tell him sorry, I had to go see about a girl—Will.” “Son of a bitch. He stole my line,” Sean jokingly says, referencing a previous conversation in which he told Will the story about giving up his ticket to a World Series Game to talk to his future wife.⁶⁵ Notably, Will isn’t copying Sean’s life. On the contrary, this is, first, Will’s way of thanking Sean, for he never explicitly thanks him, choosing instead to express his gratitude in an intimate way that only Sean will understand. Second, his usage of Sean’s line communicates that he was listening all along during those early sessions, and that, like Sean when he met his wife, Will is acting in complete

⁶³ *Good Will Hunting*, directed by Gus Van Stant, Amazon Prime Video.

⁶⁴ *Good Will Hunting*, directed by Gus Van Stant, Amazon Prime Video.

⁶⁵ *Good Will Hunting*, directed by Gus Van Stant, Amazon Prime Video.

freedom. As such, the scene immediately cuts to Will's car, driving on the open road, showing him venturing off into the unknown to pursue the girl he loves, the true desire of his heart.

CONCLUSION

At the outset, I stated that I am convinced of three things: the preeminent place of freedom in human life, the essentiality of communion for the attainment of freedom, and the value of film as a unique route for philosophical reflection. In the end, by way of an exploration of two contemporary films, this thesis has demonstrated not only the relationship between the notions of freedom and communion but also the extraction of wisdom from film, a medium too often ignored as a legitimate source of philosophical truth. I conclude with some final remarks about my overall desire with this project.

The films, *Dead Poets Society* and *Good Will Hunting*, hold a special place in my heart, and I needed to know why. Thus, I did not choose these films simply because they are some of my favorites. On the contrary, I chose these films because they explore some of the most meaningful questions human beings can ever ask. How do we live a fulfilling life, and what role, if any, do others play in the attainment of such a life? As illustrated through the characters and relationships explored in this thesis, a fulfilling life is one that is lived in freedom, and it is only with and through other people that we can ever attain freedom. Therefore, if we do not know how to enter into communion with others, then we will never be truly free, and thus never know what it is to be human.

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