

Human Mind Through Film

Dead Poets Society

Summary: Jessica See AntiRomantic.com

Dead Poets Society explores the conflict between realism and romanticism as these contrasting ideals are presented to the students at an all boys preparatory school. Welton Academy is founded on tradition and excellence and is bent on providing strict structured lessons prescribed by the realist, anti-youth administration. With the dawning of each new semester, hundreds of parents abandon their sons, leaving them in the tried hands of Welton staff in hopes that they will raise doctors and lawyers. When a replacement English teacher arrives, who happens to be a Welton alumnus, he brings with him a passion for teaching romanticism, thus opening a never-before-seen world to his students.

The story is predominantly viewed through the eyes of Todd Anderson (Ethan Hawke), a newcomer to Welton, and his roommate Neil Perry (Robert Sean Leonard). Todd is painfully shy and terrified that what he might say is insignificant and meaningless. This is particularly disturbing to him since he is repeatedly told that he has "big shoes to fill" being the younger brother of a former valedictorian. Neil, on the other hand, is bright and full of ambition, which is unfortunately squelched by his overbearing, controlling father. Mr. Perry dictates every detail of his son's life including extra curricular activities, future plans, and specifically what others think of him.

The new English teacher John Keating (Robin Williams) begins his teachings with a fervent lecture on their imminent deaths, explaining to the students that their lives are fleeting so they should seize the day to make their lives count, to leave a legacy of "carpe diem." He continues his teaching by instructing the class to rip out the pages of their books which describe a scientific way to determine the greatness of poetry. He teaches them the works of the romantic poets such as Thoreau and Lord Byron and employs outdoor exercises to warn them of the dangers of conformity and the power of sports as a way which human beings push each other to excel.

Amidst these eccentric activities, the students, intrigued with their new teacher, learn that he was a member of the Dead Poets Society. When asked, Keating describes glorious moments of

creating gods, but warns them to forget about the idea. Nevertheless, they repeatedly sneak off campus to convene their own version of the Dead Poets Society. Todd is allowed to attend as an exception: since he does not want to read aloud, he keeps minutes of the meetings. Throughout these meetings, each character is able to develop his own romantic or realist nature.

The shocking clash between realism and romanticism begins to unfold when Charlie Dalton (Gale Hansen) prints an obnoxious article in the school news in the name of the Dead Poets. The administration is appalled and begins an investigation. Meanwhile, Knox Overstreet (Josh Charles) falls madly in love with a girl who is practically engaged to the son of his parent's friends. He pursues her relentlessly, driven by romantic ideals, in the face of the threats on his life by her boyfriend. Neil realizes that his real passion in life is acting and proceeds to land the role of Puck in a *Midsummer Night's Dream* at the local theater. He begins to weave a tangled web of deception by failing to inform his father, then lying to Mr. Keating when his father finds out and demands he quit the play. Feeling trapped, after his final performance and a standing ovation, he takes his own life.

This horrible outrage echoes through the hallowed halls of Welton, applying even greater pressure to the Dead Poets. When Mr. and Mrs. Perry demand a thorough investigation, Welton administration links the Dead Poets Society, which they determined as the cause for the upheaval, to Mr. Keating. Each member is called before the administration and their parents to sign a confession statement indicating that Mr. Keating filled their minds with these lofty ideals ultimately leading to Neil's suicide. Richard Cameron (Dylan Kussman), ultimately a realist concerned most with doing what is already determined to be right, signs the statement and encourages the rest of them to do the same. Knowing full well that Keating was not responsible, Cameron lets him take the rap to free himself.

Angered by this betrayal, Dalton punches Cameron in an impulsive fit displaying his final romantic act, only to be expelled. The last to sign, though unwillingly, is Todd, thus removing John Keating from his treasured position. In one final scene, displaying the beauty of a balance between the two ideals, Todd is able to cry out to Mr. Keating, who stopped by the class to collect his belongings, "O Captain, my Captain!" Todd, who previously had no identity,

contributed his verse to mankind, climbing to the top of his desk to salute his fallen teacher, who changed his life.

Dead Poets Society

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Dead Poets Society is an Academy Award-winning 1989 film, directed by Peter Weir. Set in 1959 at a conservative and autocratic boys prep school, it tells the story of an English professor who inspires his students to change their lives of conformity through his teaching of poetry and literature.

The story is set at the fictional Welton Academy in Vermont and was filmed at St. Andrew's School in Middletown, Delaware. A novelization by Nancy H. Kleinbaum based on the movie's script has also been published.

Plot

Seven boys, Neil Perry (Robert Sean Leonard), Todd Anderson (Ethan Hawke), Knox Overstreet (Josh Charles), Charlie Dalton (Gale Hansen), Richard Cameron (Dylan Kussman), Steven Meeks (Allelon Ruggiero) and Gerard Pitts (James Waterston) attend the prestigious Welton Academy prep school, which is based on four principles: Tradition, Honor, Discipline and Excellence. According to the boys, the four pillars of "Hellton" are Travesty, Horror, Decadence, and Excrement.

On the first day of class, new English teacher John Keating (Robin Williams) tells the students that they can call him "O Captain! My Captain!" (the title of a Walt Whitman poem) if they feel daring. His first lesson is unorthodox by Welton standards, whistling the 1812 Overture and taking them out of the classroom to focus on the idea of **carpe diem (Latin for 'seize the day')** by looking at the pictures of former Welton students in a trophy case. In a later class Keating has Neil read the introduction to their poetry textbook, a staid, dry essay entitled "Understanding Poetry" by the fictional academic Dr. J. Evans Pritchard, Ph. D., which describes how to place the quality of a poem on a scale, and rate it with a number, a process that was popular in literary

circles at the time. Keating finds the idea of such mathematical literary criticism ridiculous and encourages his pupils to rip the introductory essay out of their textbooks. After a brief reaction of disbelief, they do so gleefully as Keating congratulates them with the memorable line "Begone, J. Evans Pritchard, Ph. D." He later has the students stand on his desk as a reminder to look at the world in a different way, just as Henry David Thoreau intended when he wrote, "The universe is wider than our views of it" (Walden).

The rest of the movie is a process of awakening, in which the boys (and the audience) discover that authority can and must always act as a guide, but the only place where one can find out one's true identity is within oneself. To that end, the boys secretly revive an old literary club in which Keating had been a member, called the Dead Poets Society. One of the boys, Charlie Dalton, takes his new personal freedom too far and publishes an article in the school flyer that proposes girls be allowed at Welton. The article implies that the reason for the proposed change is to give the boys pleasure. When the faculty learns of it, he is paddled and interrogated about the others involved. Charlie says he acted alone.

John Keating standing on a desk.

This free thinking brings trouble for one of the boys, Neil. He decides to pursue acting, which he loves and excels at, rather than medicine, the career his strict father (Kurtwood Smith) had chosen for him. Keating urges Neil to tell his father how he feels before appearing in a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in which Neil wins the role of Puck. Neil feels unable to and lies to Keating, saying that his father is still unhappy with his acting but is letting him keep the role as long as he keeps up his studies, too. But Neil's father finds out the truth. After Neil's performance his father remains unimpressed and Neil is taken home instead of returning to school with everyone else.

Infuriated by this affront to his authority, Neil's father plans to pull him out of Welton and to enroll him in Braden Military School to prepare him for Harvard University and a career in medicine. Unable to cope with his feelings and equally unable to come out to his father, Neil commits suicide with his father's revolver.

As a consequence of Neil's suicide, Nolan, the headmaster, holds an investigation into the tragedy. Nolan gets help from one of the students, Richard Cameron. When Charlie Dalton finds out that Cameron has squealed on them, he furiously attacks his former friend, and is expelled from Welton.

Neil's father takes no responsibility for his son's death and instead holds Keating responsible. All the boys, but Todd, confess what Keating has taught them, but coerced by his strict father, Todd regretfully signs a written confession casting blame on his former teacher. Keating is accused of inciting the boys to restart the Dead Poets Society, although they recreated it themselves, but Keating is fired.

In the film's dramatic conclusion, the boys return to English class following Keating's termination. The class is now being temporarily taught by Nolan, who has the boys read from the very Pritchard essay they had ripped out at the start of the semester. As the lesson drones on, Keating enters the room to retrieve a few belongings. On his way out, Todd apologizes to Keating for having signed the confession, citing the force exercised by the Academy. Keating acknowledges this. Nolan sternly orders Todd to be quiet and demands that Keating leave at once. As he exits the door, Keating is startled to hear "O Captain! My Captain!" being called out by Todd, who has stood on his desk as Keating bid him to do earlier, demonstrating the new perspective Keating has taught him. Furious, Nolan warns Todd to sit down immediately, only to be interrupted as, one after another, most of the students stand on their desks calling out "O Captain! My Captain!" as a form of salute (one student who does not rebel is Cameron (the snitch)). The looks in the boys' eyes reveal that the life lessons Keating wanted to impart to them through poetry will be taken to heart. With tears in his eyes, Keating says: "Thank you, boys. Thank you," and then walks out of the classroom for good.

Sources and inspirations

The inspiration for the Keating character is University of Connecticut English professor Samuel F. Pickering Jr., a former teacher of author Thomas Schulman at Montgomery Bell Academy in Nashville, TN. Williams, however, partly based his portrayal of the character on the late John C. Campbell (d. 2007), Williams' history teacher at Detroit Country Day School. On the first day of class it was customary for Campbell to dump the AP American History textbook in the trash and to commence lecturing extempore.

The film was also inspired by the book *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* by James Hilton, which has been adapted for television or film at least four times.[citation needed]

The introductory essay that Keating has his students read from their poetry textbook near the beginning of the movie is taken nearly word-for-word from an early chapter of Laurence Perrine's *Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry*, which is still occasionally used by AP English classes in the United States.

Charlie Dalton writes his poem on the image of a centerfold; she is Elaine Reynolds, Miss October 1959 in *Playboy* magazine. In another reunion, the centerfold for Miss March 1959 Audrey Daston is seen briefly.

In one scene, a bagpipe player stands on the docks in the middle of the night. The song played is "The Fields of Athenry", an Irish ballad that tells the story of a man who stood up against 'the famine' and 'the crown' and was arrested for it. This echoes the boys' actions: they stood up against the school and were punished, even though they did it for the right reasons (the song was composed in the 1970s, and is an anachronism).

The uniform of the fictional Welton Academy shares characteristics with that of director Weir's real high school, The Scots College, including the use of the rampant lion on blazer breast pocket. The major difference is that Welton's uses red and blue, while Scots' uses a gold and blue colour system.

The quotation from Henry David Thoreau read at the beginning of each meeting is incorrect. It actually reads

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived ... I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner..." (61) (Walden, 1854).

The line that Keating refers to from Whitman's poem "Song of Myself" is also misquoted: it actually reads "I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world".

Neil Perry says a line in the film which catches the minds of all. He speaks the words of Puck's soliloquy at the end of A Midsummer Night's Dream:

"If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumber'd here
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream,
Gentles, do not reprehend: if you pardon, we will mend:
And, as I am an honest Puck,
If we have unearned luck
Now to '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."