

FILM REVIEW

Dead Poets Society



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"If you listen real close, you can hear them whisper their legacy to you. Go on, lean in. Listen, you hear it? - Carpe - hear it? - Carpe, Carpe Diem, seize the day boys, make your lives extraordinary."
-John Keating, *Dead Poets Society*

"*Dead Poets Society*" is a 1989 American coming-of-age film featuring Robin Williams as John Keating, an English professor at Welton Academy whose unconventional approach to teaching and learning the humanities serves as an inspiration for a group of seven students to resurrect the 'Dead Poets Society' that Keating was once a part of. The film's narrative explores the journey of students who, having unconsciously conformed to societal norms and institutional expectations, begin to critically examine and question these conventional structures. Through their engagement with poetry, they embark on a journey of self-discovery, finding purpose and redefining their understanding of life and love. For Keating, humanity can only sustain itself through the arts; through passion, contestation, query and aspiration. Poetry then extends beyond lyric, rhythm and structure; it evolves into the exuberance of human expression, curiosity, temper, and mirth.

A key focus of the story is the profound impact of Keating's teachings on two students, Neil Perry and Todd Anderson. Neil, constrained by his father's authoritarian control and expectations for him to attend Harvard and pursue a career in medicine, struggles for autonomy, while Todd lives in the shadow of his brother, a distinguished Welton alumnus. It is through Keating and the Dead Poets that both Todd and Neil gain agency over their lives and voices. However, even as the narrative renders primary focus on their stories, multiple characters undergo implicit transformations and confront dilemmas through what Keating offers. Be it Charlie 'Nuwanda' Dalton, who constructs his own epithet to frame his identity and vocally retaliates against authority at Welton or Latin professor George McAllister, whose nuanced acceptance of Keating's ideals nearing the closing of the film represents change within a continuum. What I particularly enjoy about the film is how the students and their lived realities become centralized within the plot; their exploration and introspection of the maladies and romances of life direct how the audience interprets the same. Companionship and love are recurring themes; the Dead Poets are able to express themselves, seek out their dreams and vocalize their journeys through their togetherness. Nonconformity is another thematic pulse emphasized within the story. The film directly critiques conventional educational frameworks and institutional

hierarchies, in particular reference to how free will and creative choice are curbed within academic spaces. I find this particularly relevant even within the context of current educational structures, where individuality is constructed by those who can wield power and enforce control. By choosing to question and resist, one frames their own distinct, unbridled narrative. The despair emerging out of the symbolic demise of choice and expression becomes central to the film's climax and Neil's ultimatum. Unlike other films that employ similar figures of inspiring educators within their narratives, *Dead Poets Society* progresses realistically towards its conclusion. Trauma, grief and recovery are empathetically portrayed during Neil's suicide and its aftermath. One can note how Keating's presence does not produce immediate and profound structural transformations; rather, the inherent dilemmas and philosophical confrontations within the students subtly progress. Keating's most momentous achievement as an educator culminates within Todd's stance; for now he stands alone in the face of authority; unafraid and undeterred. For each of his students that chose to stand on their desks and call upon their 'captain', invisible yet empowering journeys have been undertaken; for they dream, love and live.

As we all must inevitably become "food for worms" as mortals, our aspirations can only be fulfilled when we leap beyond the boundaries restricted by society and "seize the day". Through this endeavor we become extraordinary, unrestricted and free.

"No matter what people tell you, words and ideas can change the world." -Carpe Diem.



"You must strive to find your own voice, boys, and the longer you wait to begin, the less likely you are to find it at all."