

# Dead poet's society

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



While the movie *Dead Poet's Society* does not quote from Emerson specifically, it relies on other standards of the romantic tradition. People like Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman play a prominent role in the film. However, it is Ralph Waldo Emerson who espoused many of the ideas of transcendental thought, from which Transcendentalism is based. Emerson's presence is felt in almost every scene of the movie. Emerson's philosophy is clearly shown in the contrast between Welton's pillars and Keating's teaching methods and philosophy. These are incredibly important because taken together they shape the acts of the boys.

While Welton Academy values tradition, honor, discipline, and excellence, Keating marches to a different drummer. The boys are told at the opening service that "The key to your success rests on our four pillars. These are the bywords of this school, and they will become the cornerstones of your lives" (*Dead Poet's*). Emerson's influence is seen in the basic rejection of every one of these four pillars. Emerson believes the tradition stifles individuality. He makes a statement in *Self-Reliance* about valuing creators, not tradition. Keating urges the boys to follow Emerson.

Rather than doing the things that have always been done and being safe, they should venture out and try new things. The very creation of the *Dead Poet's Society* is an example of this. They form this society newly for themselves and must even sneak away to do it. Knox throws caution to the wind and very poetically expresses his feelings of love to Chris. As Emerson asserts in "Nature," taste is the love of beauty. Neil decides to live his desire by playing Puck in the Shakespearean drama. Rather than be safe and secure these boys are willing to strike out and try new things.

Keating and Emerson are both anti-tradition. “ Try never to think about anything the same way twice! ” Keating encourages his students. “ If you’re sure about something, force yourself to think about it another way” (Dead Poets). According to Emerson, people can get stuck in ruts and weaken the intensity of their lives. As Emerson writes in “ The American Scholar,” The books, the college, the school of art, the institution of any kind, stop with some past utterance of genius. This is good, they say, let us hold by this. They pin me down. They look backward and not forward.

But genius always looks forward. The eyes of man are set in his forehead, not in his hindhead” (Emerson). Keating applies this thought in a number of ways in the movie. Simply by having them rip out the pages of the intro by J. Evans Pritchard, they are emphasizing the power of their thoughts, not the thoughts of someone who came before. Similarly when they look at all the old pictures in the trophy case, Keating makes it appear as though those young men are encouraging them to seize the day, to live in the present and make the most of their lives.

“ Did most of them not wait until it was too late before making their lives into even one iota of what they were capable? In chasing the almighty deity of success did they not squander their boyhood dreams? Most of those gentlemen are fertilizing daffodils now. However, if you get very close, boys, you can hear them whisper. Go ahead, lean in. Hear it? (Whispering) Carpe Diem, lads. Seize the day. Make your lives extraordinary! ” (Dead Poet’s). This advice is true to Emerson in being anti-traditionalist.

Learning in general, according to Emerson and Keating is about inspiring young minds to be creative and to act, not to give them knowledge of the

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past. Keating's nontraditional teaching methods espouse this. Standing on top of desks, writing and reading poetry, and walking exercises in the courtyard. Emerson says, "Of course, there is a portion of reading quite indispensable to a wise man. History and exact science he must learn by laborious reading. Colleges, in like manner, have their indispensable office—to teach elements.

But they can only highly serve us, when they aim not to drill, but to create; when they gather from far every ray of various genius to their hospitable halls, and, by the concentrated fires, set the hearts of their youth on flame" (Emerson). Keating attempts to set these new minds afire with new ideas, not teach them the cannon of old ones. Emerson believes in honor but a different kind of honor than Welton Academy. Welton believes in the honor that comes from their being an elite school with lots of students who go on to other prestigious schools.

Therefore, the boys must follow rules and do well to maintain honor. Emerson and Keating believe in the honor of trusting oneself and following one's own heart. They believe in the honor of creation and of throwing off the chains of tradition. Welton believes in discipline that is so firm that it squelches creativity and individuality. Emerson is not tolerant of this; neither is Keating. Keating does the lock step exercise in the courtyard to show the boys just how easy it is to fall into step with others, and how dangerous that can be. He encourages the boys not just to write papers but to write poetry.

In fact, he makes them read their poetry aloud, which is where he does the creative writing "barbaric yawp" activity with Todd Anderson. Rather than drilling them rote, he continues to stretch their minds, thus increasing their

ability to think. Welton also encourages excellence, but again that excellence is a very pragmatic approach. Excellence equals getting good grades. Welton fails to recognize the excellence of a boy like Charlie Dalton. His phone call to God and his newspaper article are pure genius that Emerson and Keating recognize. Keating and Emerson encourage their own kind of excellence.

“ Deal with the important things in life—love, beauty, truth, justice” (Dead Poet's) is what Keating tells the boys to do. According to Emerson's “ An American Scholar,” a true scholar must have self trust and must be original in thinking and in action. Charles Dalton or Neil Perry from the movie would exemplify those qualities. Charles Dalton paints his face and encourages people to call him Nwanda. He also acts on his convictions with the letter from God and the newspaper article. He does not give in even at the every end when he is severely injured and most probably will be expelled.

He holds on to his morals and values. He is a leader and a creator. According to “ The Poet”, “ Man hopes. Genius creates. To create, -to create, - is the proof of a divine presence” (Emerson). Dalton creates beautifully as does Neil in his production of Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream. Todd Anderson creates a wonderful poem as he is spun around in circles by Mr. Keating. Emerson also says that “ Action is with the scholar subordinate but it is essential” (Emerson). Charles Dalton and Neil act. They get the courage to live by their principles.

Todd fails to stand up for his until the very end when he salutes Keating from the top of his desk as “ Oh, Captain, My Captain. ” Emerson is seen clearly in this movie from the very beginning in Keating's unorthodox teaching methods to the very end when Todd Anderson leads the charge of paying

tribute to Keating. Like others before him, Mr. Keating ultimately pays a price for being a nonconformist. However, the movie portrays him as an Emersonian hero. In contrast the traditions and the methods of Welton Academy, Mr. Keating is ousted but not without making a profound impact on the lives of these young men.