

Synopsis of the film's plot



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The story takes place in 1959 at Welton School in Vermont in the USA, an upper private preparatory school for boys who want to get into famous universities: the Ivy League.

The fall term begins with a very traditional ceremony during which a new English Literature teacher, Mr. John Keating, former student at the institution, is introduced.

With his unconventional teaching methods, he inspires the students to act as individuals. He encourages them to think for themselves. They have to find new points of view, to discover their own ways and feelings, and to “ Seize the day.”

The film focuses on the new teacher and on a group of his students: Neil Perry, Knox Overstreet, Charlie Dalton, Steven Meeks, Richard Cameron and Gerard Pitts, who have known each other for several years, and a new one, Todd Anderson. They decided to revive the “ Dead Poets’ Society” but interpreted in their own way: a kind of literary club of which Mr Keating was a member.

This movie is about what happens when these students decide to pursue their own desires, and to live life with the passion that Mr. Keating encouraged. Ultimately, it is about what happens when a few idealistic students find themselves confronted against conservative forces that resist all change, including the drive for personal self-determination.

Overview of the characters

Mr Keating

A former student of Welton Academy, as a teacher, Mr Keating is the boys' source of inspiration and encouragement. He makes poetry “ drip from [their] tongues like honey,” using it as a medium to encourage his charges to strive for excellence and individuality. He also introduces his students to the phrase, ‘ Carpe diem’, a Latin expression that translates as ‘ Seize the day’. Mr Keating’s teaching methodology is highly unconventional and conflicts with Welton’s four pillars: “ Tradition, Honour, Discipline, and Excellence”. He is dismissed from his position at the end of the film, charged with causing Neil Perry to commit suicide.

Neil Perry

Neil Perry is a confident and popular student who excels in his studies. He is well-liked by both his peers and teachers and is a natural leader. Inspired by his passionate English teacher, Mr Keating, he re-establishes the ‘ Dead Poets Society’. This shows that he is prepared to challenge the school’s authority. Neil’s aspirations to become an actor are snuffed by his controlling father who refuses to give Neil any choice about his future. As a result, Neil commits suicide at the end of the film.

Todd Anderson

Todd is a shy and introverted student who is new to Welton Academy. Todd’s older brother was a previous valedictorian of Welton and both the school and his parents clearly have high expectations of him. An obedient and studious young man, Todd tries hard to please his teachers but lacks confidence at the beginning of the film and this prevents him from reaching his potential.

However, both Neil and Mr Keating support and encourage him and he consequently develops considerably as a character. At the end of the film, he is the first student to stand on his desk in support of Mr Keating.

Knox Overstreet

Though shy and academically focussed at the beginning of the film, Knox develops considerably as a result of his inchoate relationship with Chris. Romantic and idealistic, he pursues Chris relentlessly, applying Mr Keating's philosophies to his circumstance. By seizing the day and taking risks, he ultimately wins Chris, in spite of the fact that she is "practically married" to Chet Danberry, the son of a family friend. Knox's character is evidence of the positive effect of Mr Keating's teachings.

Charlie Dalton or Nuwanda

Rebellious, recalcitrant and reckless, Charlie Dalton is the most extraverted and daring of Welton's students. He resists the authority of the school and is ultimately expelled for refusing to sign the document condemning Mr Keating. Attention-seeking and chauvinistic, he also invites two girls to the Dead Poets Society meetings. Though he admires and respects Mr Keating, he takes Keating's principles too far and takes several imprudent risks.

Richard Cameron

Cameron is an assiduous and ambitious student who conforms totally to both the school's and his parents' expectations. Keen to succeed academically and win the favour of his teachers, he is very compliant and is prepared to betray his friends in order to further his own interests. Cameron is ultimately responsible for the dismissal of Mr Keating as he selfishly accuses Keating of

encouraging Neil to commit suicide; he is complicit with the school's administrators.

Steven Meeks

Meeks is the most academically gifted of the boys and; this is certainly his reputation amongst his peers. Though studious and compliant, he is well-liked by the others and is a strong supporter of Mr Keating. Like others, he reluctantly joins the Dead Poets Society but ultimately embraces all that it stands for.

Mr. Perry

Mr Perry is Neil's paternalistic and dominating father. He is determined that Neil will finish school at Welton and study medicine. To this end, he ensures that Neil is focussed and not distracted by unnecessary extra-curricular activities such as the school magazine. Neil rebels against this but unable to confront his father, ultimately decides that he is "trapped". Mr Perry's refusal to support Neil's acting aspirations ultimately lead to Neil's death.

Mr. Nolan

He is the director of Welton School illustrating the four pillars of the institution "tradition, honour, discipline, excellence". He is the opposite character of Mr Keating and represents the conformism of the high class society at this time. He assures to send his students in elitist colleges and possesses the complete trust of their parents.

Gerard Pitts

Pitts is an insignificant character but is part of the core group of boys who form the Dead Poets Society. Tall and lanky, he is socially awkward and

somewhat withdrawn. Though he is introverted and does not seem to take risks, he rises from his seat at the end of the movie, demonstrating that he clearly respects Mr Keating.

Different styles of Leadership

1. Charismatic leadership vs. Authoritarian leadership

In this part, we are going to focus on two characters and their difference of personality and behaviours through their leadership styles: Mr Keating and Mr Nolan.

Mr Keating: a charismatic leader

Charisma is linked to a number of criteria that we will develop.

During the entire movie, Mr Keating seems to be someone who pays much attention to the person he is talking to. He's making that person (the students) feel free to be who they are and feel like the most important person in the world. He's able to create a climate of intimacy which is linked to the trust.

For example, during his first class, he's talking to the students as individuals. He wants to make them realize that they all have their own desires and he wants them to follow their own path.

Mr Keating pays a great deal of attention in scanning and reading his environment, and is good at picking up the moods and concerns of both individuals and larger audiences. In this way, he knows how to answer to the student's needs and to adapt himself to these others. A good example is

when he teaches in class: he knows he's subject to a number of interrogations but he adapts his exercises to the concerns of the students.

He also uses a wide range of methods to manage his image. He engenders trust through visible self-sacrifice and takes personal risks in the name of his beliefs. He shows great confidence in his followers (the students). He is very persuasive and makes very effective use of body language as well as verbal language.

Mr Keating has a deliberate charisma in a theatrical sense: he makes effective use of storytelling, including the use of symbolism and metaphor. Especially when he talked about The Dead Poets Society for the first time, he described the world of poetry which is linked to passion and aim of life.

In the same time, we have the impression that all along the movie he tries to build a group, his group of students, by making it very clear and distinct, separating it from the other classes. No other group has classes outside or on a football field. In this way, he is building the image of the group, in particular in the minds of his students, as being "different" to all others, so "superior" in a way.

Also, he attached himself firmly to the identification of the group, such that to join the group is to become one with the leader. In doing so, he creates an unchallengeable position for himself.

Furthermore, Mr Keating appears as a Charismatic Leader because he may not want to force anything. His beliefs are by themselves highly valuable.

As we saw, Mr Keating tends to be a charismatic leader. A number of criteria are relevant to emphasize this theory as his vision, his sensitivity to the environment, to students need, his personal risk taking and his unconventional behaviour.

Besides, according to Emily Spencer “charismatic leaders are the product of follower perceptions and attributions that are influenced by actual leader traits and behaviour, the context of the situation, and the individual and collective needs of the followers”, we will study later how Mr Keating influenced his students and answers to their fundamental needs.

“A charismatic leader uses his personality and charms rather any form of external power or authority” this characterizes Mr Keating’s behaviour compared to Mr Nolan’s one. He never forced the students to do anything and he encourages them to find their freedom.

Also, charisma is linked to a unique vision, which we will develop below. Mr Keating has his own vision and uses unconventional ways to express it.

But because of his confidence in his own beliefs, he thought they were infallible, he didn’t think about the impact of his changes even when he received adequate warning from others. Although he meant well, it was the cause of a lot of problems.

Mr Nolan: an authoritarian leader

“A leader is a person whose charisma helps them to guide a group of people in a direction they believe is desirable. Someone with authority uses their power to guide a group of people in a direction they believe is desirable.”

Mr Nolan is the director of the School. " Tradition, honour, discipline, excellence" is his key words and his power is based on it. He is from the aristocratic and traditional society; his role is to preserve the integrity of the school and to prepare his students to get into the high society and to be their new models.

" If a person has the ability force a person to perform a certain act, or the ability to otherwise coerce them, than that person is an authoritarian".

Mr Nolan can be recognized by how he makes his decision. There is no discussion or the discussion begins with a foregone conclusion. Also, he guides the students with negative motivation that leave them in a bad position. They feel that they are the only ones who disagree and that is why they have to be exiled.

Ultimately, this means that the only way to really oppose Mr Nolan was with the support of a sizable percentage of the group. Mr Nolan will speak of betrayal in this case. Mr Keating would not, as a disagreement is never a betrayal unless there is an expectation of being followed and obeyed.

In comparison, Mr Keating guided students by the infectious nature of his vision. They wanted to follow him, but they were free not to.

The relationship between Neil and his father

Neil's aspirations are to become an actor but they are snuffed by his controlling father who refuses to give Neil any choice about his future. Mr Perry is a paternalistic and dominating father. He is determined that Neil will finish school at Welton and study medicine.

In this part, we are going to show that Neil's character has a charismatic behaviour and his father an authoritarian one. Thus, we will try to establish a comparison between the Mr Keating and Mr Nolan relationship and the Neil and Mr Perry relationship.

From the beginning, Neil appears as a bright student, he is engaged in a lot of activities within school and he is recognized as the leader of the group of students.

But this character feels a deep contradiction between his own dreams and the ones his father has for him. He is going to fight against the morality of his parents following Mr Keating beliefs.

We notice that Neil has a charismatic attitude towards the other students at the beginning of the movie " You say things and people listen". He is the one who decided to re create the Dead Poets Society and used of his " power" to convince the other. He became more and more attracted to Keating's philosophy and acted as if it was a revelation for him. He is discovering a new state of mind through Keating's words and poetry and he is ready to listen to his feelings.

The scene when Mr Perry enters in Neil's room is quite relevant concerning the relationship between the two characters.

Neil had decided to follow theater courses but he didn't advise his father. When Mr Perry find out, he orders his son to quit. At this instant, the illusions of Neil are falling apart and he can't express his feelings. He feels trapped and he acts as a child who did a mistake.

Mr Perry uses the expression “ absurd acting business” and refers to the deception he might have feel. He gives orders and Neil has no other choice than answering “ Yes Sir” and crying. Mr Perry concludes with “ You will not let me down”.

We observe that the relationship is based on authority. The two characters are quite different: Mr Perry is cold, quiet and he hides his feelings and Neil is full of hopes and dreams with a deep emotional sensitivity.

Mr Perry character refers to Mr Nolan one. He thinks that his way of thinking is the best for his son; he doesn't consider creativity, pleasure and feelings. Both characters express their power in the same way: they order, people have to follow. They don't let the opportunity to other to discuss and they are acting as if they were carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders.

We also can say that this kind of character is complex because in away they are following their own beliefs, as Mr Keating does, and are convince it's the right one. We have no doubts concerning the good intentions of Mr Perry to encourage his son to follow a medicine career. He thinks it is the best for his son to succeed. This kind of character has difficulty to “ open up” the box and to extend the horizons.

Two values can be differentiated concerning these characters that we will describe later: realism versus creativity.

We also notice that after his conversation with his father, Neil goes to Keating's office to ask him for advice. Neil realized that the teacher always had a dream and that he is actually living for it. He expresses his feelings

concerning his father “ he’s planning the rest of my life, he never asked me what I want”.

Neil decides to not quit his role in the play and invites his friends and Mr Keating to watch him. Unfortunately, his father heard about it and comes to the theater. On stage, Neil talks to his father through the character he is playing and his last sentence in the play is “ I have a dream”.

The last interaction between Neil and his father takes place at home. Mr Perry is desolated, he accuses Neil to have defying him and to have run his life. At this time, we know that Mr Perry would never change his state of mind and will never allow his son to follow his own way.

Mr Perry’s refusal to support Neil’s acting aspirations ultimately lead to Neil’s death.

Other personality and behavioural differences: the followers

The movie is based on different characters and we will focus on this part on the evolution of the group of students through the leadership of others.

Even if we saw that Neil for example was considered as a leader within the group, all the students are characterized as “ followers” concerning or the leadership of Mr Keating or the authority power of Mr Nolan. The movie shows a lot of personality and behavioural differences concerning the characters.

We can analyze the evolution of the characters in three times which correspond with the three classes of Mr Keating and we can focus especially on the influence of Mr Keating in their interactions.

First of all, we have to remind that they all are part of the “ tradition, honour, discipline, excellence” system. They grew up in this environment and their life has been predicted depending on these criteria. Their “ model” is obviously Mr Nolan who is trusted by the entire community and also the teachers of the school.

When Mr Keating introduced himself at the first class, they are all already prepared to receive a poetry class as they have been taught last years. Keating starts by asking them to open their book and to read the preface which sum up the poetry as a mathematical figure. Then he asked them to rip out the entire page. They are all shocked and don't know what to do because they know it goes against the system they are used to live in.

Then, Keating asked them to get out of the class room and to look at the important figures of the school in the hall way. They are not either used to be taught outside of a class room. Most of them are wondering if it's not a trap, no one is moving until one decides to do it. The rest follows.

This attitude towards this new teacher is going to last during three classes. They don't dare to do something different, something which goes against their principles, to open up their perspectives and that's exactly what Keating tries to emphasize. But we notice that no one will directly be opposed to Keating's methods. They will all follow.

They wait for someone to take the initiative, most of the time Neil. Someone who is recognized as their leader, they trust him.

There is only one scene during the classes which shows that one student is opposed. At the third class, when Mr Keating asks his students to walk through the garden and to find their own way of walking, one student told Keating “ you invite us to find our own freedom, I’ve the freedom to not do it”. But the others continue because they found their new leader, Mr Keating.

Thus, we notice that the characters of the movie can be considered as a group: they are re creating the Dead Poet Society under Neil’s recommendation, they are united by a group, a secret society which they are all members of... But in the same time, they are becoming less dependant on each other because they are all trying to find their own way.

Their independence within the school is significant during the scene which shows two of them dancing on the sound of “ Radio Free America” or when one of them declares “ For the first time of my life, I know what I wanna do”.

As we talked about in the characters description, all the students are differentiated by their own actions in the movie. At the beginning they are characterized by being students from the same school then they can be perceived as different individuals.

Through Todd Anderson and Knox Overstreet characters, we can analyse the evolution of the characters.

Todd Anderson is really shy and seems a bit younger than the others but he likes writing except that he doesn't have enough self confidence to do it. At the beginning, he is not able to stand up in front of the class and is always trying to hold Neil back from his desires. But at the end, he appears as the first one to show his opposition to Mr Nolan and to stand up on his table to show that he is grateful to Mr Keating.

Knox Overstreet is a shy and academically focussed student at the beginning of the movie but influenced by Mr Keating he is going to listen to his feelings and to believe in himself. He will fall in love with a girl who is actually engaged and is decided to conquer her. Before kissing her for the first time, he repeats to himself "carpe diem" and after telling his friends that he wrote her a poem, he says "She didn't say anything but at least I did it".

Besides, when the school is trying to accuse Mr Keating for being responsible for Neil's death, we can note some different attitudes and behaviours.

As we analysed before, their behaviours are linked to the notion of dependence or independence and it's relevant to notice their different attitudes towards the institution at the end of the movie.

All along the movie, these students formed a group. They have been influenced by Mr Keating, he was defined as their "mentor" and for some of them, their life changed considerably. As we saw, they were united by the Dead Poets Society and the beliefs of Mr Keating were ingrained in their mind.

But at the end, under the pressure of Mr Nolan and their parents, they all betray their new principles and sign a paper which attests that Mr Keating had a bad influence on them and that he is the direct responsible of Neil's death. Ironically, the only one who refuses it is Charlie Dalton, the only one who was opposed to Keating's exercise...

Their dependence to Welton academy is stronger than their dependence to Mr Keating and in this case, we can say that the Mr Nolan's authoritarian model wins.

The direct consequence on this is the break of their friendship. The group doesn't exist anymore because of the different attitudes they have towards Mr Keating or Mr Nolan's influence.

Different thematic

1. The power of a myth : a necessity to unit

Welton Academy versus the Dead Poets Society

Even if Welton School and the Dead Poets Society are perceived as two different " institutions" and are opposite by their beliefs; nevertheless they have a similarity: they both are based on strong values established a long time ago constituting a model for students.

In this part, we will focus on the power of myths and we will establish a comparison between " tradition, honor, discipline, excellence" referring to Welton and " carpe diem" referring to the Dead Poets Society.

Besides, we will see that in both cases, the myth is a necessity to unit.

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Welton Academy “ tradition, honor, discipline, excellence”

The story of the movie is set in Welton Academy in Vermont in 1959, a conservative and aristocratic preparatory school where education is understood to be a rigorous academic learning program combined with the shaping of the students' characters according to explicitly traditionalist ideals.

The movie begins with a processional march of the students into the main auditorium of the school, where teachers and parents are awaiting the address of Mr. Nolan, who inaugurates the new school year by reminding everyone of the high standards of the institution, and the school's high success rate in sending its graduates to Ivy League universities. Students carry banners on which are embroidered the “ four pillars” of Welton's pedagogical program: Tradition, Honour, Discipline, and Excellence.

“ 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.”

Most of the students at Welton are from respectable families; most are destined to follow in the footsteps of their fathers and become doctors, corporate lawyers, or bankers.

Also it is really clear that Welton has a conservative spirit and is dedicated to give to the students its traditionalist way of thinking. The school represents tradition and the teaching methods are very established, which is opposed to the innovative and creative way of teaching of Mr Keating.

Honor represents the renown that the school receives by placing a lot of students in elite universities. The institution is well known and prestigious; Mr Nolan has for role to maintain the reputation of the school and to keep high standards. He is only here to watch that the students are taught in a traditional way.

Discipline means repression in Welton. Its goal is to establish a framework for the students by controlling them. In the movie, the respect of discipline is really important to insure uniform behaviour and the repression of the student's individuality and creativity. Their personal desires can't exist without discipline.

Welton has a lot of rules. First of all, the school is only for boys and girls are not allowed in the institution. The students have to wear a uniform and have to spend their free time to study. Some extra activities are planned but even being part of the redaction of the school newspaper is a lost of time for Neil's father. The code is really strict and can be perceived as " old school" concerning the punishments.

Concerning the " excellence", it refers to not simply succeed in what you are doing but being the best and get the approbation of the institution. In the movie, we notice that it is more important to get good grades than understanding what the subject is about. The school is a preparatory school to get into prestigious universities and all parents are counting on Welton to make their child succeed. It doesn't matter how they are treated and if they are happy or not, they just have to be excellent and behave the way the institution is expected them to.

As we saw in the movie, with Mr Keating's influence, most of them realize that they have desires but the school will not allow them to develop their instincts. The authority of Mr Nolan and the pressure of their parents emphasize the importance of academic studies to get a successful career and also to answer to their parent's dreams.

Also, they can't recognize excellence if it is out of the frame. Neil could be really good at acting but his father doesn't even take that into consideration.

Welton is an institution based on a philosophy where tradition, honour, discipline and excellence are the key words. It is also a school where the self reflection, the personal development, the creativity, the non conformity... are not recognized and not tolerated. Students nickname the school "Hellton".

Mr Nolan, model of authority and obedience, represents the traditionalism and the conservatism of Welton: an institution opposed to the individualism of Mr Keating and the Dead Poets Society philosophy.

The Dead Poets Society "Carpe Diem"

One day, Neil finds an old yearbook with Mr. Keating in it. After seeing that Mr. Keating listed Dead Poets Society as one of his activities, the boys ask Mr. Keating what this was. He replies that the Dead Poets Society was dedicated to taking "the meaning out of life". To do so, the members would sit in an "old Indian cave" near a certain pond and "in the enchantment of the moment . . . let poetry work its magic."

When Knox has doubts about a bunch of guys just “ sitting around reading poetry,” Keating claims that they were not just a “ Geek organization,” that they “ were romantics,” that they “ didn’t just read poetry”.

“ Spirits soared, women swooned and gods were created, gentlemen”

That evening, under Neil’s leadership, the boys “ reconvene” the Dead Poets Society. Neil honors tradition by opening the new “ chapter” of the society the way Keating and his classmates used to open it, by reading the passage from Henry David Thoreau.

“ I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately

I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life

To put to rout all that was not life

And not when I had come to die

Discover that I had not lived”

This first meeting of the renewed society is a tremendous success. The boys really get into reading poetry, including the concluding lines from Tennyson’s “ Ulysses,” which Neil reads and which, in the context of the movie as a special significance.

“ Come my friends, it’s not too late to seek a newer world”

We can notice at this time that Neil is completely influenced by Mr Keating character and curious about The Dead Poets Society. When he starts reciting

poetry, he seems to have discovered a new way of thinking, it is a revelation for him. The words that he pronounces have an echo in himself.

The Dead Poets Society is also the link between the past and the present which makes the students think about their future. It is also a way for them to avoid their parent's values that are really heavy: it gives them the opportunity to have a special time to avoid constraints which create a strong link between all of them.

Now the group of students is united by this secret. This intimacy allows them to act on their own, they are using it as a way to know all the things which are forbidden inside the school. They are smoking, drinking, playing music or bringing girls. We can say that they are experimenting the pleasures of life which give a real sense for Keating and which represent the devil for Mr Nolan.

Also, we observe that "tradition, honor, discipline, and excellence" are represented in having taken the initiative to reconvene the Dead Poets Society, despite the fact that the school would not look too favourably upon it.

Furthermore, The Dead Poets Society which could represent a place of decadence for Welton Academy is illustrating the values that Mr Keating is believing in. It refers to one of the first sentence he pronounces in class "Life exists and identity".

We see all along the movie that the Dead Poets Society will take more and more importance in the student's life and that it will become their creed.

“ I promise. The Dead Poets Society is my word”

2. Mr Keating’s vision

“ Carpe Diem, seize the day” is the phrase that the movie is focusing on and is reflecting the vision of Mr Keating, an English teacher who has just been hired, and who displays ideas and a spirit that deviate sharply from the established Welton practices and norms.

Keating propagates an anti-authoritarian philosophy of life and he will soon profile himself as the provocative and inspiring educator of the students of whom he is in charge.

During his very first class session Keating demonstrates that he is not just there to convey academic information, but also to show what students can do with such knowledge in their everyday lives. The first class session is, indeed, not so much a lesson in English literature, but a dramatic philosophical wake-up call.

“ Word and images can change the world”

“ The human race is filled with passion”

Examining some poetry lines, Mr Keating interpolates his students “ Why does the poet write these lines?”. He answers “ Because we are food for worms, la