

## Dead poets' society

New England, the 1950s. Todd Anderson (Ethan Hawke), a lonely and painfully shy teenager, who is under pressure by his stern parents because he must live up to his older brother's reputation to attend Yale and become a lawyer, arrives for the new semester at the Welton Academy for boys. This semester begins during an orientation gathering with a speech given by the stern Headmaster Nolan (Norman Lloyd), who states the academy's four pillars: Tradition, Honor, Discipline, and Excellence. Todd meets Neil Perry (Robert Sean Leonard) an ambitious student whom becomes his dorm roommate.

Later in his dorm, Neil is ordered by his grumpy and domineering father (Kurkwood Smith) to drop an extracurricular class in order to maintain good grades so the boy may become a doctor much as he has done. Neil is under pressure from his stern father's will. Also, Mr. Perry tells Neil that Mrs. Perry also wants him to become a doctor, which further worries the boy. A little later, Todd tells Neil that he is in a similar situation with his parents involving his older brother who also attended Welton a few years ago, graduated, and attended Yale Law School and became a lawyer and his parents want the exact same thing for him. But Todd does not have the courage to tell his parents that he instead wants to be a writer, not a lawyer.

During the first day of classes Todd and Neil experience the various teaching methods which include speeches by the trig teacher, as well as the Latin teacher, and the math teacher who states that "all 20 questions at the end of the first chapter are due tomorrow". But in contrast to these orthodox teaching methods, the guys see a different side of the school when they attend English class taught by the newly arrived and liberal Mr. Keating (Robin Williams), whom they met briefly during the orientation in which Keating was a student at Welton himself many years ago. Keating enters his class whistling the 1812 Overture, and he first takes the boys out in the hallway and tells them that they are powerful individuals, which no teacher in the academy would do. These two actions show his difference from the other teachers because no other teacher would commit the actions he does. Also, he tells the boys they may call him "Oh Captain, my Captain", if they dare. These examples of Mr. Keating's teachings show the boys how to think for themselves. Mr. Keating then tells the boys "Carpe Diem", which is Latin for "seize the day".

In addition to Todd and Neil, a small group of other students whom include the lovesick Knox Overstreet (Josh Charles), the flip Charlie Dalton (Gale Hansen), the pragmatic Richard Cameron (Dylan Kussman), liberal Steven Meeks (Allelon Ruggiero) and the moderate Gerard Pitts (James Waterston), also react to the first day's lesson with comments from "that was weird" to "neat".

The next day, Keating, however, starts the class with a traditional teaching approach by having Neil read out loud the introduction to their poetry textbook, which describes how to rate the quality of poetry. Keating finds such mathematical criticism ridiculous and instructs his pupils to rip out the essay which is one of three ways that he demonstrates freedom of expression and non-conformity. When some students hesitate, he tells them "this is not the bible. This is a battle, a war. You will have to learn to think for yourselves." He later has the students stand on his desk as a reminder to look at the world in a different way.

A few days later, Knox Overstreet is asked to attend a dinner party at the Danburry household. When he arrives, a beautiful girl answers the doorbell and intently captures his attention. Later, he learns that the girl, Christine, has boyfriend named Chet, but does not give up the hope of dating her.

One day, Neil finds an old Welton yearbook with Mr. Keating in it. After seeing that Mr. Keating listed "Dead Poets Society" as one of his activities at the school, the boys ask Mr. Keating what this was. He replies that the DPS was a secret club

dedicated to taking the meaning out of life. To do so, the members would sit in a cave near a certain pond less than a mile from school grounds and recite poetry. With this new idea in their head from asking Mr. Keating what the DPS was, Neil and the boys decide to start up the DPS once again.

While coming inside after recess, Neil convinces the boys to join the DPS and meet at midnight by the creek to start their first meeting. Todd tells them that he will come along to the meeting as long as he does not have to read any poetry. When they arrive at the cave, the boys hold their first meeting. Knox shows up so that he can build confidence, like learning pretty poetry, to swoon Christine Danburry.

During their next poetry class, Mr. Keating makes the boys stand on a table to see the world from a different perspective, which is another way he demonstrates non-conformity and freedom. At the end of class, Mr. Keating assigns the boys a poem for homework which must be made up, and will be read aloud during Monday's class.

Keating's unorthodox teaching methods soon circulate quietly among the other teachers who scorn his liberal and ideal methods. During a dinner, the Latin teacher tells Keating, "you are taking a big risk in making your students think they are artists". Keating replies: "I'm only trying to make them free thinkers". The Latin teacher rebukes him by saying, "free thinkers at age seventeen? Not really. Be a realist!"

Neil attempts to seize the day by trying out for a part in the play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Knox goes to a public High School football game and sees Christine in the arms of Chet, who is a football player.

Back in English class, Mr. Keating has the boys kick soccer balls while yelling poetry aloud, and is the final way that he demonstrates freedom and non-conformity. Then, Neil receives a letter that says he got the part of Puck in the play. Now he must write a letter of permission to the headmaster and Mr. Perry, along with their signature of approval.

The next day in class, Mr. Keating tells Todd to stand up and recite his poem. When Todd tells his teacher that he did not write a poem, Mr. Keating tells the boy to make one up right now on the spur of the moment. Todd's new poem is about the picture of a madman on the wall, and Mr. Keating seems to have an astounding affect on Todd. By pulling the boy out of his seat in front of the class and create his own poem, Mr. Keating successfully reaches out to Todd and builds his confidence.

That night, the boys meet at the cave to hold another DPS meeting, and afterwards Knox gets the courage to call Christine, who invites him to a party at her house.

The following day, Mr. Keating teaches tells the boys not to conform, and Todd gets the same desk from his parents that they got him last year for his birthday. When Knox goes to Christine party that night, he attempts to seize the day by kissing her, but only gets beat up by Chet.

The day after the DPS meeting, which is also attended by girls, Dalton writes a letter to the school asking if girls may be admitted to Welton Academy. During a meeting which addresses this letter, Dalton speaks out of line and is paddled by the headmaster. He is asked to tell the man about the DPS meetings, but Dalton refrains from doing so.

Thus at this point, the boys begin to abuse the transcendental philosophy by bringing girls to the DPS meetings, drinking freely, smoking freely, attending parties, publish an offensive and profane article, going against the school policy, and kissing other girls.

When Keating is lectured by Headmaster Nolan about the DPS meetings, Mr. Keating tells the boys to "be wise, not stupid" about protesting against the system.

When Neil's father arrives at Welton on an unexpected visit, he scolds Neil for joining the play and orders him to quit. Neil tells Mr. Keating about the incident,

and that his father won't allow Neil to act. To this, Mr. Keating suggests that Neil tell his father how the boy truly feels. Neil does, but his bossy and stubborn father continues to refuse to let him partake in the play and tells Neil that he must focus all his energy on studying to become a doctor. A few days later, Neil lies to Mr. Keating and tells him that Mr. Perry allowed Neil to continue with the play. When Knox goes to Christine's high school, he embarrasses her in class by giving her flowers and reciting poetry. Then Christine goes to Welton to tell Knox that his actions embarrassed her. Knox apologizes and convinces Christine to go to the play with him.

After Neil's great performance as the main character in the play receives a standing ovation, but the boy is angrily driven home by his father who arrives at the end of the play having been informed somehow. While at home, Mr. Perry tells Neil that in retaliation for his defiance, he will pull Neil out of Welton and forcibly enroll him in Braden Military School to prepare him for Harvard University and a career in medicine. Unable to cope with the future that awaits him or make his stern and narrow-minded father understand his emotions, Neil commits suicide with his father's gun.

The next day in school, the boys are told of Neil's suicide and each is asked about the DPS after Cameron reveals the club's secrets to the headmaster. When he will not cooperate, Dalton is expelled from the Welton Academy when he punches Cameron for betraying them.

Neil's father holds Keating responsible for his son's suicide and forces Headmaster Nolan to launch an investigation into Keating's teaching methods. The next day, Todd is called to Nolan's office, where his parents are waiting. Nolan forces Todd to admit to being a member of the Dead Poets Society, and tries to make him sign a document blaming Keating for abusing his authority, inciting the boys to restart the Dead Poets Society, and encouraging Neil to flout his father's authority. Todd sees Richard's, Knox's, Steven's and Gerald's signatures already on the document. At first, Todd refuses to sign, but when Nolan threatens to expel him and his equally stern parents refuse to take him back home should he be kicked out of school, the painfully shy Todd does not have the nerve to argue with any of them and signs the signature. (It is strongly implied that Nolan and the other parents used similar and intimidating tactics to get the others to sign the document). As a result, Keating is fired from Welton and is forced to leave without any severance pay or letter of recommendation to teach at any other public or private school in the state. Although the other teachers at Welton have disapproved of his teaching methods, most of them are somewhat upset and down to see Keating leave.

The next day, Headmaster Nolan arrives at English class where he tells the students that he is their new teacher until a substitute will arrive to replace him. The shy and afraid Todd cannot respond when asked what the boys have done in the class so far, so Nolan asks Cameron. He tells the teacher that the class thoroughly covered poetry, but skipped over realism. The headmaster has the boys read the introduction, but it is ripped out, so he gives Cameron the teachers book to read from. Just then, Mr. Keating enters the room to collect a few of his papers before he leaves. Todd reveals to Keating that he and the other students were intimidated into signing the confession. Nolan orders Todd to be quiet and demands that Keating leave.

As Keating is about to exit the classroom, Todd (for the first and only time in the movie) finally breaks through his cowardice and self-pity and calls out "O Captain! My Captain!" and then stands on top of his desk and faces Keating. Nolan warns Todd to sit down or face expulsion. In what is probably the movie's most touching and emotionally powerful scene, one by one, Knox, Steven, Gerard, and all of the members of the Dead Poets Society, except for Cameron and one or two other students, climb onto their desks and face Keating to salute their former teacher, and they remain standing on their desks despite Nolan's orders for them to sit back down until he gives up and slumps against the teacher's desk, angry and

emotionally defeated. Seeing that his work at the school had not been in vain, a visibly touched Keating says, "thank you boys. Thank you." With Todd and the other the students looking on, Keating then happily leaves the classroom with tears in his eyes, and walks out of the school for good.

## Cast

Robin Williams	...	John Keating
Robert Sean Leonard	...	Neil Perry
Ethan Hawke	...	Todd Anderson
Josh Charles	...	Knox Overstreet
Gale Hansen	...	Charlie Dalton
Dylan Kussman	...	Richard Cameron
Allelon Ruggiero	...	Steven Meeks
James Waterston	...	Gerard Pitts
Norman Lloyd	...	Mr. Nolan
Kurtwood Smith	...	Mr. Perry
Carla Belver	...	Mrs. Perry
Leon Pownall	...	McAllister
George Martin	...	Dr. Hager
Joe Aufferly	...	Chemistry Teacher
Matt Carey	...	Hopkins

## Selected memorable quotes (with notes on difficult vocabulary)

**John Keating:** 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. And medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for. To quote from Whitman, "O me! O life!... of the questions of these recurring; of the endless trains of the faithless... of cities filled with the foolish; what good amid these, O me, O life?" Answer. That you are here - that life exists, and identity; that the powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse. That the powerful play \*goes on\* and you may contribute a verse. What will your verse be?

**pursuit** = occupazione, attività; **amid** = in mezzo, tra

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**John Keating:** Sucking the marrow out of life doesn't mean choking on the bone.  
**to suck** = succhiare; **marrow** = midollo; **to choke** = strozzare

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**John Keating:** There's a time for daring and there's a time for caution, and a wise man understands which is called for.

**to dare** = osare; **caution** = cautela; **which is called for** = (qui) quale è richiesto (nel caso specifico)

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**Dalton:** [*answering phone*] Welton Academy, hello. Yes he is, just a moment. Mr. Nolan, it's for you. It's God. He says we should have girls at Welton.

**John Keating:** Language was developed for one endeavor, and that is - Mr. Anderson? Come on, are you a man or an amoeba?

[*pause*]

**John Keating:** Mr. Perry?

**Neil:** To communicate.

**John Keating:** No! To woo women!

**endeavor** = impresa; **to woo** = corteggiare

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**Neil:** [*quoting 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."

**Dalton:** I'll second that.

**Neil:** "To put to rout all that was not life; and not, when I had come to die, discover that I had not lived."

**To second** = appoggiare; **to rout** = espellere, scacciare.

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**McAllister:** "Show me the heart unfettered by foolish dreams and I'll show you a happy man."

**John Keating:** "But only in their dreams can men be truly free. 'Twas always thus, and always thus will be."

**McAllister:** Tennyson?

**John Keating:** No, Keating.

**unfettered** = senza vincoli/restrizioni

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**John Keating:** Close your eyes, close your eyes! Close 'em! Now, describe what you see.

**Todd Anderson:** Uh, I-I close my eyes.

**John Keating:** Yes.

**Todd Anderson:** Uh, and this image floats beside me.

**John Keating:** A sweaty-toothed madman.

**Todd Anderson:** A sweaty-toothed madman with a stare that pounds my brain.

**John Keating:** Oh, that's \*excellent\*! Now, give him action - make him do something!

**Todd Anderson:** H-His hands reach out and choke me.

**John Keating:** That's it! Wonderful, wonderful!

**Todd Anderson:** And all the time he's mumbling.

**John Keating:** What's he mumbling?

**Todd Anderson:** Mumbling truth.

**John Keating:** Yeah, yes.

**Todd Anderson:** Truth like-like a blanket that always leaves your feet cold.

**John Keating:** [*some of the class start to laugh*] Forget them, forget them! Stay with the blanket. Tell me about that blanket!

**Todd Anderson:** Y-Y-You push it, stretch it, it'll never be enough. You kick at it, beat it, it'll never cover any of us. From the moment we enter crying t-to the moment we leave dying, it'll just cover your face as you wail and cry and scream.

[*long pause then class applauds*]

**John Keating:** Don't you forget this.

**sweaty** = grondante, madido; **that pounds my brain** = (qui) che mi assilla; **to**

**choke** = soffocare; **to mumble** = mormorare; **to wail** = (detto di persona)

gemere

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**John Keating:** Phone call from God. If it had been collect, that would have been daring!

**collect** = a carico del destinatario

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**John Keating:** Mr. Anderson! Don't think that I don't know that this assignment scares the hell out of you, you mole!

**mole** = talpa

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**Todd Anderson:** Keating said that everybody took turns reading and I don't wanna do that.

**Neil:** Gosh, you really have a problem with that don't you?

**Todd Anderson:** N-No, I don't have a problem, Neil. I just - I don't wanna do it, okay!

To take turns reading = fare a turno per leggere

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**Dr. Hagar:** That wouldn't be a radio in your lap would it Mr. Pitts?

**Pitts:** No sir, science experiment... radar!

[after hearing "The Introduction to Poetry"]

**John Keating:** Excrement! That's what I think of Mr. J. Evans Pritchard! We're not laying pipe! We're talking about poetry. How can you describe poetry like American Bandstand? "I like Byron, I give him a 42 but I can't dance to it!"

**I give him a 42** = modo per ridicolizzare i giudizi sulla poesia basati sull'attribuzione di un punteggio

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[about joining the DPS]

**Dalton:** It'll help you get Chris!

**Knox:** Yeah? How?

**Dalton:** Women swoon!

[Dalton rushes off to class]

**Knox:** But why do they swoon?

[runs after Dalton]

**Knox:** Charlie, tell me why they swoon!

**to swoon** = svenire

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**Knox:** C'mon, Chris, just give me one chance. If you don't like me after tonight I'll stay away forever.

**Chris Noel:** Uh-huh.

**Knox:** I promise. Dead Poets Honor. You come with me tonight and then if you don't wanna see me again I swear I'll bow out.

**Chris Noel:** You know what would happen if Chet found out?

**Knox:** He won't know anything. We'll sit in the back and sneak away as soon as it's over.

**Chris Noel:** And I suppose you would promise that this would be the end of it.

**Knox:** Dead Poets Honor.

**Chris Noel:** What is that?

**Knox:** My word.

**to bow out** = ritirarsi

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**Neil Perry:** I just talked to my father. He's making me quit the play at Henley Hall. Acting's everything to me. I- But he doesn't know! He- I can see his point; we're not a rich family, like Charlie's. We- But he's planning the rest of my life for me, and I- He's never asked me what I want!

**John Keating:** Have you ever told your father what you just told me? About your passion for acting? You ever showed him that?

**Neil Perry:** I can't.

**John Keating:** Why not?

**Neil Perry:** I can't talk to him this way.

**John Keating:** Then you're acting for him, too. You're playing the part of the dutiful son. Now, I know this sounds impossible, but you have to talk to him. You have to show him who you are, what your heart is!

**Neil Perry:** I know what he'll say! He'll tell me that acting's a whim and I should forget it. They're counting on me; he'll just tell me to put it out of my mind for my own good.

**John Keating:** You are not an indentured servant! It's not a whim for you, you prove it to him by your conviction and your passion! You show that to him, and if he still doesn't believe you - well, by then, you'll be out of school and can do anything you want.

**Neil Perry:** No. What about the play? The show's tomorrow night!

**John Keating:** Then you have to talk to him before tomorrow night.

**Neil Perry:** Isn't there an easier way?

**John Keating:** No.

**Neil Perry:** [*laughs*] I'm trapped!

**John Keating:** No you're not.

**whim** = capriccio; **to be trapped** = essere in trappola

Sources: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0097165>