

DEAD POETS SOCIETY

Directed by Peter Weir

Produced by Steven Haft, Paul Junger Witt, and Tony Thomas

Distributed by Touchstone's Buena Vista Pictures

Released in 1989

The desire to conform is intrinsic to the human character. (Almost) no one wants to be alone. In the thirty years that elapsed between *Dead Poets Society's* setting and its production the rebels overwhelmed the traditionalists. Once the minority, they were now the majority. Conformity became a matter of conforming in rebellion against traditionalism/conservatism. Indeed, now that the freaks had taken over, it was the squares who were alone.

The film sees conformity and 'seizing the day' as antithetical concepts. So if you're conforming, you're wasting your life. But this Thoreauvian business of sucking the marrow out of life is just intellectualized hedonism. It's merely a less repellent variety of selfish living. Mr. Keating would disagree, maintaining that living a fearless, original life is the way to "contribute a verse" to the ongoing saga of the human race. This verse would, presumably, benefit all who follow and would, therefore, not constitute a selfish gesture.

It's hard to discern. The film goes out of its way to vilify the Establishment of traditionalists and conservatives to which the boys reluctantly align themselves by condemning Mr. Keating in the film's waning minutes. Consider: Headmaster Nolan is all about appearances, his only goal to protect Welton Academy, not the boys who are entrusted to it. The faculty is cold, officious, boring, pedantic, impatient, and old. The briefly-seen Mr. Danbury is a superficial back-slapper. Mr. Anderson defers to Headmaster Nolan rather than his son on the matter of Keating's responsibility for Neil Perry's death. (He also gives his son the same birthday present two years in a row.) Red-headed Richard Cameron, the youngest member of the Establishment, is a two-faced butt-kisser.

But the chief of the conformist scoundrels is Mr. Perry, the exasperating and insufferable boor trying to maintain his toe-hold on social respectability. In the film's opening, after coldly ignoring his son's pleas that he be allowed to maintain his editor position with the school annual, Mr. Perry says, "Now listen, you need anything, you let us know."

He just did!

Later, Mr. Perry accuses Neil of making him an unwitting liar, since he denied to some lady that his son was in a play. (This is a laugh since a lie can only occur when the speaker gives affirmation to an untruth he knows is untrue, not the situation here.) Despite his son's straight 'A's, Mr. Perry yanks Neil from the play and decrees that Neil will be transferred to a military academy. When his son tries to give voice to his feelings, Mr. Perry gets belligerent rather than quiet and reflective. To top it all off, as Mr. Perry retires for the night, he arranges his slippers 'just so,' a nice character touch reinforcing the fact that he doesn't want what is best for his son, but he wants everything to follow according to his plan (that Neil will become a doctor).

All the kids must reckon with the Establishment that seems to hold their futures in ransom. Neil's reaction is surely the most bizarre. Instead of punching his dad or running

away from home or anything that could provide him an alternate future, Neil chooses no future. He commits suicide! No evidence of depression or psychosis has been established. He just kills himself.

So the film, which has to this point presented an entertaining account of a different time, now goes off the rails. By making Neil's father unbelievably overbearing, and making Neil's reaction to his subjugation so bizarrely disproportionate, we can have the scapegoat/aborted redemption dénouement, but at what cost to the narrative?! There are audience members of a conservative bent who value hard work, tradition, and see at least some benefit in conformity (community cohesiveness, preservation of morality). But the director decides to ignore the unwashed and, instead, preach to the choir of cheering ex-hippies.

Now, it's true that conformity to an ethos of social standing, wealth, and family pride is not worth fighting for. But the film (adroitly, it must be conceded) lumps preservation of hollow tradition with preservation of all tradition. Mr. Keating at one point asks his students to stand on top of his desk, to get a different look at things, extolling the boys, "Just when you think you know something, you have to look at it in another way." By that reasoning, one could never stop looking! This is but a precursor to the '60s mantra, Question Everything. This ideology posits that there is no definite truth. It's not a lie (see above) but it is *not true*. After all, if there is no truth, there can't be one answer, for the fundamental quality of truth is that a question can have a solitary, definitive answer. So challenging the cosmos without pausing to hear the reply, as we are wont to do, is a disagreeable habit of man. We like to ask questions for the sake of the questions (for the sake of the questioner). We don't ask in hopes of finding truth. When Keating says, Ask questions and Don't conform, he's really saying, Don't submit. *Don't submit to the rule of man*, but more important for these humanists, *Don't submit to the rule of God*.

When Keating asks why he is standing on his desk, Charlie Dalton's reply is that by doing so Keating can feel taller. Keating said he was wrong, but Dalton was right.

All through, the film is a frustrating exercise for audience members who like to ask questions but don't question everything.

Another scene finds Keating being warned by Headmaster Nolan. The issue is whether the danger of conformity or self-indulgent waste is a greater risk to 17-year-olds. Nolan explains that the curriculum is set because it works; stick to it "and the rest will take care of itself." But what is 'the rest?' If Nolan means that the boys will find successful careers, that's not enough. Will they be good fathers, helpful and informed citizens, happy? Maybe a Keating-esque teacher could turn these boys around in college, before their quest for money and prestige becomes all-consuming. That's doubtful. Few teachers care as much as Mr. Keating.

The real problem is that Nolan represents Keating's employer, Welton Academy. Did Welton hire Keating for his unique approach or was he hired to implement Welton's venerated program? The answer is, probably, the latter. If so, Keating has conflicting duties. He owes his employer the fulfillment of his contract; he owes the boys his insight into what makes for a satisfying life. Again, the film makes Headmaster Nolan so unlikable that his opinion on the matter garners no adherents, but, objectively, he's probably right.

Keating made a good point when he said we are food for worms. Our lives are brief and of little import. Thoreau, as Keating reminds us, wrote that most men lead lives of quiet desperation. That's getting to the truth, which is: All men need God. Those who lead desperate

lives are searching for that Something. Those who do not search have already found God or think there is no need for Him. Those in the latter category, like Mr. Keating, while certainly more pleasant than the Mr. Perrys of the world, are even further from the truth. The gospel of Keating elevates the significance of the present (*Carpe Diem*) in hopes of achieving immortality (by contributing a verse to the human drama).

Since we've discussed the enemies of Keating and Neil Perry enough, let's turn to the film's protagonist, Todd Anderson. He's the younger brother of a National Merit Scholar, and is never thought of as his own man. Neil and Mr. Keating make it their project to bring Todd out of his shell.

In his rectitude and reservation, the filmmakers present Todd as the truest portrait of a spirit quashed by conformity. But there is a refreshingly practical quality about Todd. As soon as Neil decides he wants to audition for the play, Todd pours a bucket of cold water on his roommate by demonstrating how this dream is but an unworkable fantasy—Neil will have to lie, dodge, and scheme in order to act at Welton, and that can only last a short time. Neil pretty much tells him to shut up.

Todd learns much from Neil, but Neil learns nothing from Todd and instead listens to his heart, amplified by the exuberant Mr. Keating (who, to be fair, does insist that Neil confront his father and ultimately obey his wishes until Neil graduates). Then Neil dies and Todd's other great inspiration is falsely saddled with responsibility and fired.

Where Neil clammed up when confronting his father, Todd finally comes through, confessing to Mr. Keating, with explosive suddenness, his part in Keating's fall. Then he stands on his desk, indicating that he will no longer see the world subject to the blinders of the Establishment. He also, by elevating himself above his cowardly classmates, declares that he is superior to them. (But Todd will stay in school. Charlie, who got expelled for punching the slimy informant Cameron, is the real hero.)

There's a lot of ways the concluding scenes of the film could go down. If Todd had refused to sign the papers admitting to Dead Poets Society membership and damning Mr. Keating, Keating would have still been fired (as each of the boys rationalized when it was their turn in Nolan's office) but we would benefit by a rousing shouting match between Todd and Headmaster Nolan, and Todd would maintain his honor. At least we can take comfort that, by the film's end, he didn't give up like Neil did. Though a more believable ending would be (as one critic imagined it) to have each boy maintain his seat in stony silence while Keating, forlorn, shuffles away in defeat, a more satisfying conclusion would find Todd giving action to his contempt for Welton (instead of merely voicing his approval of Mr. Keating) by walking out in solidarity with his beloved teacher. As Charlie remarked about Neil's suicide, schools go down for this sort of thing. So, take the school down! Go to the newspapers, stop attending, and cease tuition payments until Headmaster Nolan is fired. For even if Welton's emphasis on conformity is defensible, making a scapegoat out of an innocent man at the behest of the guilt-shirking jerk father of a dead student is pathetic. Like the academy in *Scent of a Woman*, someone should take a flamethrower to the place.

Instead, Todd and the other desk-ascenders voice their opinions, but don't back them up with action. Talk *is* cheap.

Since Todd is the protagonist, the film is saying that what he does is enough. So, in a twist on the aforementioned 1989 perspective on conformity (that it is o.k. to conform if you conform with the rebels), now it's okay to conform with the conformists if you first say you're not one of them.

Conservatives/traditionalists accept the world as it is, not as they would like it to be. They're disinclined to challenge the social mores of the present, because they believe today's boundaries were established as a consequence of past mistakes. They know they're not guaranteed happiness, no matter how hard they seek it. And they don't blame others when life crumbles to bits. This is why conservatives/traditionalists have such a hard time in the marketplace of ideas. Unlike the other side, they don't get to have their cake and eat it, too.

Once Keating walks out that door, all nine students will sit back down and resume their studies like everybody else who stayed seated. The film, thus, endorses the behavior of protestors who adopt ideological stands, but deliberately ignore/avoid the real-world consequences of their views. Is it enough to just show you care? *Dead Poets Society* assures us that by denouncing wrongs while all the while perpetuating them we will be different. But that's not true—that's what everybody does. And when Todd stands up but doesn't walk out, he's a hypocrite, too.