

Dead Poet's Society

(Drama)(1989)

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Major Characters

Mr. John Keating.....Robin Williams
 Young professor of English who is both inspiring and a bit eccentric.

Neil Perry.....Robert Sean Leonard
 Student who wants to be an actor although
 his very strict father insists that he become a doctor.

Todd Anderson.....Ethan Hawke
 Neil's very shy roommate.

Knox Overstreet.....Josh Charles
 Student who falls in love with the daughter
 of old friends of his parents.

Charlie.....Gale Hansen
 A very defiant student.

Mr. Nolan.....Norman Lloyd
 The conservative and strict head of Welton Academy.

Plot Summary

This is the story of students at the respected "Welton Academy," a preparatory school in Vermont. Such schools were (and often still are) very conservative institutions that serve as high schools for parents who insist on sending their children to the best universities. Welton, like many prep schools, admitted only boys. The movie takes place in 1959.

The plot centers on the influence of Mr. Keating, a young and exciting English and poetry teacher, who is determined to teach his students to live life with absolute passion. Mr. Keating, using poetry as his vehicle, teaches his students to challenge the institutions around them.

Inspired by Mr. Keating's philosophy of life, many of his students recreate the "Dead Poet's Society," a secret club which meets in a cave in order to discuss poetry, philosophy and other topics. The club, which Mr. Keating had created many years earlier when he was a student at Welton, would be completely

unacceptable to the conservative school, which discourages students from "thinking for themselves." Indeed, Welton students should be in their rooms, studying only the prescribed materials that their teachers assign.

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.

Words and Expressions that You may not Know

Students arrive at Welton Academy for the beginning of the school year.

OK boys, settle down.

An alternative to calm down.

The four pillars: Tradition, honor, discipline, excellence.

A "pillar" is a physical foundation upon which something is built.

"Welton Academy."

Name of the preparatory school where the movie takes place.

75% went on to the Ivy Leagues.

A term for the most elite American Universities on the East coast, including Harvard, Yale and Princeton. Ivy is the green plant that grows on many of their buildings.

Fervent dedication.

An interesting adjective which means passionate or intense.

Preparatory School.

Expensive private high schools that prepare students for college. They are often called "prep schools," and their students are often called "preppies."

Thrilling ceremony.

A good adjective which means exciting, or perhaps delightful.

You have some big shoes to fill.

A way of saying that a family member you are being compared to did an excellent job in something you are going to do yourself.

Vaporizer.

A little device that produces steam to help deal with a cold.

Looks like a stiff.

Slang for a dead body, or in this case, an unappealing person.

Don't mind him. He's born with his foot in his mouth.

"Ignore him....since he's always saying stupid and foolish things."

Travesty.

A mockery or exaggerated imitation.

A common phrase is "a travesty of justice."

Bootlicking.

A crude adjective for a person willing to do anything to please another.

Valedictorian.

The person with the best grades in a high school class, and who usually presents a speech at the graduation ceremony.

Extra-curricular activities.

Refers to activities like sports, clubs and so on (outside of classes).

You should drop the annual.

"To drop" something is to give it up. "The annual" is the book that schools produce each year with photos of each student.

Tell him off!

"To tell someone off" is to yell or curse at them ("fuck you").

Oh, that's rich.

When used sarcastically, "rich" shows disgust or disbelief, though it is rarely used this way.

They're just a bunch of jerks.

A very common term for an idiot, or perhaps an unpleasant person.

I urge you not to test me on this point.

Another way of saying "don't challenge me."

Mr. Keating arrives to teach poetry. The boys find themselves with a very passionate and rebellious teacher in a very conservative school.

Well, **come on!**

Here, it means "let's go." It is probably the most widely used phrasal verb in English, and can mean everything from "be serious" to "go" to "stop it," depending on the context.

"Captain, my captain."

A quote from one of Mr. Keating's favorite poems. A "captain" is a military leader, and often the person in charge of a ship.

Dispel rumors, so that they won't fester into facts.

"To dispel" is to eliminate. "To fester" is to generate pus, or to rot.

The intellectual equivalent of a **98 pound weakling**.

An expression for one who is considered very weak.

They were throwing Byron in my face.

Byron was a great 19th century British poet: This is a way of saying that he was not too smart, and thus he didn't really understand Byron.

"Carpe Diem!"

The most important words in the movie! Latin for "seize the day," or more generally, "live life to the fullest." Although a Latin term, this movie popularized it into a relatively uncommon expression used by English speakers.

We are food for worms, lads.

A poetic way of saying we will all die and our dead bodies will feed the worms. "Lads" is a more British term for "guys."

Full of hormones.

Body chemicals, often meaning sexual hormones.

The world is their oyster.

Common expression meaning they can do whatever they want
An "oyster" is a shellfish delicacy.

Not one iota of what they are capable of doing.

A funny little word meaning a very tiny amount.

Now they're fertilizing daffodils.

Again, a reference to the fact that all people die and return to the ground. "Fertilizer" is food for plants, and a "daffodil" is a flower.

Their legacy to you.

A "legacy" is something handed down to future generations.

Spooky, if you ask me.

A nice little word that means scary (as in ghosts).

Don't you get anything?

In this case, "to get" is used to mean understand.

Let's go, hustle up.

An old-fashioned way to say "hurry up."

Knox visits his parents' old friends, and soon falls in love with their daughter.

"The Danburys"

Family home where Knox meets their daughter, Chris.

I'll second that.

A way of saying "I agree with what was just said."

Suit yourself.

An interesting way to say "Do whatever you want." It is often said after a person says they're going to do something different than what you think they should do.

He's the spitting image of his father.

"To be the spitting image of" someone is to look just like them.

He just did a great case for GM.

General Motors Company: Here, meaning he worked as a lawyer for GM, and probably won the case.

It's a tragedy, that she's in love with such a jerk.

Again, a very common word for an idiot or unpleasant person.

Trig.

Short for "trigonometry," which is a type of mathematics.

Mr. Keating explains how to appreciate poetry.

Excrement!

The technical (or medical) term for "shit."

Poetry is not American Bandstand!

A famous TV show in which pop musicians sang their songs.

"J. Evan Pitchart, Ph.D."

The writer of the introduction in the poetry book which Mr. Keating thinks destroys the true spirit of poetry.

Rip it out!

"To rip out" a page from a book is to remove it by tearing it out.

What the hell is going on here?

Note the addition of "the hell" in various "Wh questions" is colloquial but common. It adds emotion and emphasis.

The casualty could be your heart and soul.

A "casualty" is an injury or death. Your "soul" is the part of you that is spiritual, or not physical, and that in theory, lives forever.

You will learn to savor words.

"To savor" is to smell or taste with much pleasure or intensity.

Huddle up.

This means to come together in a tightly packed, small group.

The powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.

A section in a poem. Here, perhaps used symbolically to mean "the poem of life."

Misguided though it was.

To be "misguided" is to be lead in the wrong direction.
Note the somewhat rare grammatical construction.

Free-thinkers at 17?

A "free-thinker" is simply a term for someone who thinks for themselves and refuses to be a conformist.

I never pegged you as a cynic.

"To be pegged as" something is to be seen like that by others. A "peg" is a fastener. A cynic is an important word referring to a person who is skeptical, or does not easily trust things that she is told.

The boys discover "the dead Poet's Society," founded by Mr. Keating when he had been a student. They decide to reconvene this club.

Mr. Keating was a hell raiser.

A "hell raiser" is a person who causes a lot of trouble and commotion.

The administration wouldn't look to favorably on that.

This refers to the school administration.

They were dedicated to sucking the marrow out of the bones of life!

Very poetic way of saying that "they wanted to live life to the fullest."
The "marrow" is the middle filling of bones.

We weren't a Greek organization.

This refers here to fraternities and sororities, which are common clubs on campus that are generally considered very conservative.

Poetry rolled off our tongues like honey.

"We easily created and spoke poetry."

This stroll down amnesia lane.

A "stroll" is a relaxed walk. "Amnesia" is the inability to remember.

Do you know how many demerits were talking?!

A "demerit" is a mark made against one's academic or work record.

No shit, Sherlock!

A crude but truly great sarcastic expression meaning "that should be obvious" ("Sherlock" refers to the detective Sherlock Holmes).

Women swoon!

"To swoon" is to be overwhelmed by joy, or to faint.

Stop chattering.

"To chatter" is to talk endlessly." Also note that your teeth will chatter when its very cold.

Cut out that racket!

"Cut out" is very common for "stop," and a "racket" here means noise.

Reconvene the Dead Poet's Society.

"To reconvene" is to begin or open up again.

Todd will keep the minutes.

"The minutes " of a meeting are its official records.

You're always bumming my smokes.

A very colloquial way to say "taking my cigarettes."

("To bum" something off someone is generally more British).

A passion for jigsaw puzzles.

Puzzles cut up into little pieces that one tries to put together.

Trembling hands.

"To tremble" is to shake (usually out of fear or fatigue).

Demented mad men.

"Demented" is a slightly stronger way to say crazy.

The plague of his life.

"A plague" is literally an epidemic of disease.

In this context, it refers to his biggest problem.

He got his goat

"To get someone's goat" is to really irritate them.

Morose.

A strong word meaning very sad or dark.

Language developed for one endeavor: To woo women.

A somewhat old-fashioned word which means to seek the affection of another person.

You look forward to this...like root canal work.

This refers to the work dentists do on teeth at the root, which is usually very unpleasant for the patient!

Strive to find your own voice.

"To strive" is to work hard to accomplish something.

"People lead lives of quiet desperation."

A famous quote by the American writer Thoreau, implying that people are very unhappy with their lives.

Despite his father's wishes, Neal decides to follow his heart and become an actor.

A play, dummy.

An almost affectionate way to call someone stupid.

Open try-outs

When anyone can try out for a part in a play or movie.

I have to get the part.

The refers to an acting role in a movie or play.

Jesus, whose side are you on?

"Who are you supporting?" (Note that "Jesus" is often said to show irritation or other emotion).

Nothing Mr. Keating says means shit to you.

If something "doesn't mean shit," its not considered important. (Almost always used in a negative sentence).

You're as excited as a cess-pool.

A "cess pool" is a covered hole for receiving sewage.

You can just butt-out!

When you tell someone to "butt out," you are telling them to stop getting involved in things that shouldn't concern them.

Mr. Pitts, rise above your name!

Mr. Keating's way of implying that Gearld's last name is not particularly pretty since "that's the pits" means "that's the worst." A "pit" is the core of a fruit, as well as a hole in the ground.

To meet enemies undaunted.

This is a poetic word that means "not scared."

Let it fill your soul!

A poetic way of saying that you should completely absorb something in order to feel it inside you.

"Buck"

The name of the character that Neil will play.

We're not laughing at you, but near you!
 Normally, one say's "I'm not laughing at you, but *with you*"
 (This is a clever play on words).

Todd discovers that in every shy kid, there is a poet trying to escape.

You're in agony. Let's put you out of your misery.
 "To put someone out of their misery" is a useful way of referring to a
 mercy-killing, which is done to end their suffering.

You don't get away that easy!
 A critical phrasal verb. "To get away with something" is to
 do it without being punished or facing negative consequences.

Walt Whitman.
 A great 19th century American poet who wrote "Leaves of Grass."

Say it, even if it's **gibberish**.
 A great word that refers to nonsensical words
 or sentences that have no real meaning.

Mumbling, like a sweaty-tooth mad man!
 "To mumble" is to speak unclearly
 (This sentence is almost gibberish itself!).

As you wail and cry and scream.
 "To wail" is to cry in a high pitched voice.

That a boy!
 A common phrase you might say to a child to show approval.

Knock it off!
 In this context, it means "Be quiet!" In other contexts, a truly great
 colloquial imperative command which generally means "Stop it!"

You have got to do more, be more!
 Note "have got to"----> "gotta" in rapid speech.

The saxophone is more sonorous.
 An educated word which means pleasant sounding.

All right, god damn it, carpe diem!
 A crude but common expression used for emotional emphasis.

That's not the point!

"The point" is the critical or main idea that you want to say.
An important sentence, as is the question "What's the point?"

Their own stride.

This refers to the way or speed of walking.

To illustrate the point of conformity.

"Conformity" is the process of acting like everybody else.

The herd may go.

A "herd" is a group of cattle, but symbolically, the word may refer to people acting in conformity.

The road diverged, and I took them on the one less traveled.

"To diverge" is to separate. This is a very well known line from a famous poem.

The funny thing is...

A common way of commenting on something ironic, or unusual.

Its shape is aerodynamic.

A word popular in advertising cars which means built to move quickly through air.

How the hell is Mut, anyway?

Note the addition of "the hell" in questions to show emotion.

The Dead Poets Society faces its first crisis as the school discovers what is occurring.

Are we going to have a meeting, or what?

A common way to end a question, if you're unsure of the answer.

Me and Pitts are working on a hi-fi system.

An old fashioned term for a stereo system.

I might be going to Yale.

A prestigious (very respected) university in the state of Connecticut.

I published an article in the name of the Dead Poet's Society.

If you publish something "in the name of" another author or group, this means you are giving them credit for writing it.

If they catch me, I'll tell them I **made it up**.

"To make something up" is to create it yourself, or to produce a story or explanation that is not really true.

A **profane** and unauthorized article.

"Profane" is a serious word for obscene.

Expulsion from this school.

This is the act of being expelled, or kicked out of an organization.

Wipe that **smirk** off your face!

A "smirk" is a smile that is done in an offensive or smug manner.

Were you **kicked out**?

To be "kicked out" is to be expelled or chased out of an organization.

I'm to **turn everybody in**, and apologize to the school.

"To turn someone in" is to report them to the authorities.

"Roanda"

The noble warrior name that Charlie uses for himself.

Long before your time.

A common way of saying "before you were born."

It was hard **giving it up**.

"To give something up" is to no longer do it, or use it.

At their age? **Not on your life?!**

Here, a colloquial way of saying "its not possible!"

It was a **lame stunt**.

"Lame" is disabled or weak, and a "stunt" is an act of unusual courage, often done for the publicity.

Got it, ace?

"Do you understand, my smart friend?"

An "ace" can be an expert.

Keep your head about you.

"Stay calm, and think clearly"

A phone call from God **collect**. That would've been **daring**.

A "collect call" is when the person receiving the call pays for it.

If something is "daring, " it takes courage to do it.

***Neil faces his own crisis in deciding
whether to act, or follow his father's wishes.***

Don't dare talk back to me!

"Do not challenge or question what I have to say to you!"

This absurd acting business.

"Absurd" is a strong adjective meaning ridiculous, or unreasonable.

How did you expect to get away with it?

"To get away with something" is an important expression meaning to do something bad or illegal, without being caught or punished.

Who put you up to it?

"To put someone up to" something is to encourage them to do it.

You are through with that play!

"To be through" with something is to be finished or done with it.

You will not let me down!

"You will do as I want, as I say you should."

What's up?

An extremely common way to greet someone when you first see them. It means approximately "what's new in your life?"

How do you stand it?

Very common for "how can you accept it, or deal with it?"
If you "can't stand something," that means you hate it.

You're playing the part of the dutiful son.

An old-fashioned word for obedient, or very respectful.

You're not an indentured servant.

This is a person who must work a long time to pay off a debt.

Acting is not a whim for you.

An interesting word meaning a sudden idea or desire that has not been thought out or reflected upon.

He'll let me stay with it if I keep up the school work.

"To keep up" with something is to continue to do it.

You'll drive the girls crazy.

In this case, to "make the girls adore you," although depending on the context, you could drive someone crazy with irritation.

But it's fine for you to come barging in to my school?

"To barge into a room" is to enter in a frantic & unannounced way, often disturbing others in the process of doing so.

It just so happens that I could care less about you.

Very blunt way of saying "you mean nothing to me."

Dead poet's honor, my word.

Both "on my word" or "on my honor" mean "I promise."

***Neil's father learns a terrible lesson, and
Welton Academy looks for someone to blame.***

Why do you insist on defying us?!

"To defy" someone is to oppose or resist them.

Brighton Military School.

An academy known for strict discipline .

He will be missed.

Note the passive construction, often used on solemn occasions.

We intend to conduct a thorough inquiry.

A powerful adverb meaning complete or comprehensive.

That's it. Were all fried.

In this context, used colloquially to mean "in very big trouble."

He's a fink!

This is a very colloquial and pejorative (negative) word for one who tells the authorities about the misdeeds of others.

You think they'll just let it blow over?!

If something "blows over," it gradually fades away without having any long term consequences.

Schools go down for this.

If an organization "goes down," it means it is destroyed or badly hurt.

They need a scapegoat.

An important word for a person who is unjustly blamed for a situation, often simply because the accuser's need to blame someone.

He's a rat!

In this case, meaning a person who is a fink (see four lines above).

Who are they after?

"To be after someone" is to chase and/or try and catch someone.

Who else do you think, dumb-ass?

A crude insult for a person thought of as stupid.

Mr. Keating put us up to it.

"To put someone up" to do something is to actively encourage them to do it.

Let Keating fry. Why ruin our lives?

"Let Keating take the blame."

You just signed your expulsion papers!

Documents that officially expel a person from an organization.

We put together what's happened here.

In this case, "put together" means to be able to understand.

Mr. Keating's blatant abuse of his position as teacher.

A powerful way to say clear and offensive misuse.

We'll find a permanent teacher during the break.

In academic contexts, "the break" refers to the week or more when there are no classes.

Dead Poet's Society

Some Possible Questions for ESL Class Discussion

- 1) Was "Welton" the type of school you would want to attend? Why or why not?
- 2) What was good about the school? What was bad?
- 3) Do schools like Welton exist in your country?
- 4) If you were attending Welton, and Mr. Keating was your poetry teacher, how would you describe him to your parents?
- 5) Why did Mr. Keating tell his students to rip out the introduction of the Poetry book?
- 6) Why did the students decide to create a Dead Poet's Society?
- 7) Why was Neil's father so upset when Neil decided to try and be an actor?
- 8) Why did Neil decide to commit suicide?
- 9) Why did Mr. Nolan and the school administration force the boys to sign the paper blaming Mr. Keating for Neil's death?
- 10) Was Mr. Keating an admirable person? Was Mr. Nolan? Neil? Neil's father?

