

The Pressure of Conformity and the Need to Break Free in Peter Weir and Tom Schulman's *Dead Poets Society*

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Abstract

The film *Dead Poets Society* by Peter Weir and Tom Schulman explores the intense conflict between conformity and the pursuit of autonomy within the oppressive environment of Welton Academy. Pressured to adhere to strict traditions and societal expectations, the students face major challenges. Mr. Keating, a charismatic and unconventional teacher, inspires his students to embrace their passions and individuality, challenging Welton's norms. This article analyses the dynamics of authority at Welton and the revival of the Dead Poets Society as a symbol of rebellion. By focusing on the individual journeys of Richard, Knox, Neil, and Todd, varying degrees of success and failure in resisting conformity are revealed. The article also examines the tragic consequences of oppressive control and the transformative power of autonomy.

Dark Academia

Keywords

Dead Poets Society;
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Conformity; Freedom;
Power Dynamics.

Introduction

“Sucking all the marrow out of life doesn't mean choking on the bone” (*Dead Poets Society*¹ 01:20:28). While this may be feasible for some—provided they can identify what *the marrow of life* means to them—it proves challenging for students at the prestigious all-boys Welton Academy. The phrase symbolises living authentically and to the fullest, free from the restraints of oppression and conformity. This struggle is central to Dark Academia, where the pursuit of knowledge, individuality, and passion often conflicts with rigorously enforced societal structures. Originally from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and inscribed in Keating's old poetry book, the phrase captures Dark Academia's fascination with classical literature and intellectual freedom. It emphasises simplicity and living with only the essentials, stripping life down to its core. Raised to obey rules and

¹ From this point onward, I will refer to the film *Dead Poets Society* as *DPS*.

authority, several students struggle to attain this ideal while navigating between newfound freedom and the pressure to conform.

Peter Weir and Tom Schulman's 1989 film and coming-of-age drama *Dead Poets Society* is a precursor to the Dark Academia genre and thus informs it. The film features romanticised learning, rebellion against authority, secret societies, and the tragic consequences of pursuing passions. Set in 1959's autumnal Vermont, the film centres on the friend group surrounding Todd Anderson, who is the primary focaliser. Against the backdrop of Gothic architecture, a dimly lit cave, and gloomy landscapes, the group begins their quest to seize the day and assume agency as they follow their passions for the first time. Through unconventional teaching methods and zest, former student and newly employed Professor John Keating encourages his students to embrace critical thought and pursue their interests to gain autonomy. His methods and philosophies clash with the school's conservative motto, "Tradition, Honor, Discipline, and Excellence" (*DPS* 00:03:02). Nonetheless, Keating's advocacy for freedom through poetry and its implementation into everyday life inspires the group of students. They revive the Dead Poets Society, a club that Keating also was a member of, which reflects Dark Academia's themes of secret societies, rebellion, and the pursuit of beauty in literature.

The characters this article focuses on are the previously mentioned shy and quiet Todd Anderson, passionate Neil Perry, romance-seeking Knox Overstreet, and rule-abiding Richard Cameron. While Todd and Knox gain courage throughout the film, Neil's spirit is crushed by his father's unyielding control, leading to his suicide. Richard, succumbing to pressure and conformity, falsely blames Mr. Keating's teachings for Neil's death, resulting in the teacher's dismissal. Caught between conformity and the desire for freedom, the students face conflict and resistance, uncovering to which lengths they will go to maintain autonomy. The intense pressure imposed by Welton Academy's rigorous adherence to tradition and discipline stands in stark contrast to Mr. Keating's unorthodox teachings of life philosophy and freedom. He serves as a catalyst for the students' seizing of autonomy, emphasising the ongoing struggle between oppressive social expectations and the desire for freedom and individuality.

This article explores conformity and authority at Welton, examining Richard's motivation to embrace conformity and its consequences. It then delves into Keating's teaching methods, particularly his emphasis on 'carpe diem' and how this philosophy inspires Knox's pursuit of his dream. Next, the revival of the Dead Poets Society is

discussed as a means of escaping conformity and expression of creativity. Finally, Neil's tragic struggle for autonomy, Todd's growth and loyalty, and the students' unified defiance of Mr. Nolan are examined. The analysis also identifies elements in *Dead Poets Society* that align with Dark Academia, illustrating how the film serves as a precursor to the aesthetic and genre.

Conformity and Authority at Welton Academy

The pressure to conform cannot be pinpointed to one singular factor, as it is a multifaceted issue. Institutional and parental pressure, along with their expectations for the students, prevent the students from creating their own sense of self. An institution that is built on tradition, honour, discipline, and excellence does not leave room for the free development of individuality. This kind of academic environment is characteristic of the Dark Academia genre, highlighting darker aspects of the pursuit of knowledge, like “the pressure to excel” (Włodarczyk 49). As Marta Włodarczyk points out in her Master's Thesis on Dark Academia, “[*Dead Poets Society*] reflects some of the modern anxieties that lie at the heart of [the genre]” (49). Welton's tradition-bound setting embodies some of Dark Academia's core elements, presenting a prestigious yet oppressive institution where intellectual curiosity collides with the relentless enforcement of conformity.

In the film, authority and conformity manifest through conservative teachers and demanding parents. Combined with the peer pressure of the Dead Poets Society, they create forms of group pressure on the individual student. The American Psychology Association's *Dictionary of Psychology* defines *group pressure* as follows:

[D]irect or indirect social pressure exerted by a group on its individual members to influence their choices. Such pressure may take the form of rational argument and persuasion (informational influence), calls for conformity to group norms (normative influence), or more direct forms of influence, such as demands, threats, personal attacks, and promises of rewards or social approval (interpersonal influence).

Bearing this definition in mind throughout the remainder of this article aids in developing a deeper understanding of the characters' motivations and behaviours. Persuasion, conformity to group norms, and more direct forms of coercion are employed not only by parents and teachers but also by the Dead Poets Society.

Solomon Asch's studies on conformity and group dynamics illuminate how factors like group size, unanimity, and confidence influence the level of an individual's conformity. In group experiments, unsuspecting participants were tested against initiated participants. The latter were in the majority and would give unanimous false answers to a test. The result was that approximately 75% of the test subjects yielded at least once (Asch 18). Their reasoning for adapting or re-examining their answers was, among other things, the fear of causing anger within the group due to disagreement with the majority. Hence, feelings of intense pressure and stress emerged as well as a lack of confidence once they adapted their own answer for the first time (39, 44, 69, 70). This change of opinion proves that in uncomfortable or high-pressure situations, a person is more likely to conform. They betray their beliefs for the sake of de-escalating a potential dispute with the majority or to simply fit in.

Considering Asch's studies, it is easy to recognise similar displays of behaviour in some, if not most, of the students at Welton. In this case, however, the common notion of 'majority' does not apply. The teachers inhabit authoritative positions at the boarding school. Thus, they have direct influence and sovereignty over the students during class and in their daily lives at Welton. The parents hold the ultimate decisive power over their children's futures, regarding both their academic careers and personal lives. Together, they build a stern and unwavering front against the inferior body of students. In the film, resistance means immediate conflict since teachers and parents are in correspondence with each other. Possible consequences include corporal punishment (*DPS* 01:17:07), expulsion (01:57:02), or involuntary removal from the familiar environment and social sphere (01:40:25). It is important to note that dire consequences like these exceed those that are mentioned in Asch's studies, therefore evolving into a new category called authoritative pressure. As the film continues, the viewer learns of the fatal aftermath that this harsh attitude of teachers and parents can escalate into, like the ultimate death of Neil.

In *Dead Poets Society*, Mr. Perry and Mr. Nolan are the epitomes of forced conformity, exerting the most pressure within the authoritative structure. Mr. Nolan, in particular, embodies Welton's four pillars, ensuring adherence to these conservative values. Neil and the rest of the students have little to no choice but to obey. Their lack of autonomy, confidence, and courage hinders them from properly rebelling and standing up for themselves.

The school's foundational pillars manifest in its prison-like design. Featuring barred windows, spartanly equipped bedrooms, a fixed daily routine, mandatory uniforms, and encouraged competition, only minimal space for personal freedom remains. The school's architecture highlights the strict focus on academic achievement. Moreover, it reflects the authoritarian and isolated settings typical of Dark Academia, where the institution's architecture and traditions are symbolic for emotional confinement (Włodarczyk 68, 76, 103-4). Additionally, the students are unaccustomed to being heard or respected as individuals by their elders, further contributing to their conformity and lack of public self-expression. The oppressive environment crushes their creativity and sense of individuality. In turn, it reinforces the rigid structures imposed by the authorities.

The Dead Poets Society fosters a different form of group pressure driven by the desire to conform to its ideals and values. This dynamic is common in Dark Academia. In Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, often considered the blueprint for the genre, outsider and protagonist Richard Papen is drawn to the seclusive, elitist group of Greek students. Feeling pressured to assimilate and conform to the group's values to belong, Richard compromises his morals as he becomes an accomplice to murder and swears secrecy to protect the group. Similarly, in M. L. Rio's *If We Were Villains*, underlying peer pressure encourages the friends' adherence to group ideals and expectations. Their need to maintain the group's integrity leads to the members being complicit in hiding the truth about a member's murder. Breaking away from the group poses the risk of academic and social ruin. Although initially not connected to tragedy or crime, the peer pressure within the Dead Poets Society is existent nonetheless. In this case, however, the exclusive society primarily promotes intellectual liberation. Inspired by Keating's teachings, the members motivate each other to step outside their comfort zones. Neil, for instance, encourages Todd to break free of his self-doubt and overcome his shyness, believing in his potential (*DPS* 00:31:20, 01:04:42). Here, the pressure is supportive rather than coercive, promoting taking risks to embrace life. Additionally, the group encourages Knox to pursue Chris Noel, the girlfriend of Welton-castoff Chet Danburry, despite his initial hesitation (00:59:51). This form of group pressure or influence illustrates how the Society's ideals drive individual actions. Richard, another member who experiences forms of group pressure, will be analysed in detail in the following part.

These dynamics mirror Asch's, demonstrating that individuals often adapt their beliefs or behaviours to match group expectations, even if they conflict with personal beliefs (69, 70). While the Dead Poets Society provides a sense of belonging and purpose, it also sets expectations of courage, creativity, and rebellion against conformity. This illustrates how even groups dedicated to nonconformity can exert their own forms of pressure or influence on individual members.

Richard Cameron: Navigating Authority and Peer Influence

A prime example of a conformist student within the revived Dead Poets Society is Richard Cameron, who has a multilayered character regarding the pressure of conformity. Although attending the Society's secret poetry readings past curfew (*DPS* 00:36:26), his participation seems driven more by peer pressure than personal desire, given his fear of getting in trouble. This tension between individual identity and societal expectations is a core theme in *Dark Academia* since characters often navigate "social, moral, and psychological struggles and inequities of youth in academic settings" (Włodarczyk 24).

Asch's studies on conformity help explain Richard's behaviour, as he finds himself in the minority among friends in favour of re-establishing the Dead Poets Society. Weighing the risks of breaking the rules against his desire for approval, Richard succumbs to *social conformity* (Chakraborty 18-9). Abhinandita Chakraborty, following Asch, defines social conformity as "the behaviour of adjusting one's conduct or conviction to conform with those of a faction or populace" (18). She argues that subjection to social conformity can affect a person's speech, style of clothing, social norms, or thoughts and values, particularly in peer groups (18-9). An individual tends to conform to "authority figures or opinion leaders" since they are attributed with knowledge and credibility, wishing to be perceived in a similar manner (19). This concept is witnessed in both academic environments and fictional *Dark Academia* settings, where characters, like those in Tartt's *The Secret History* and Rio's *If We Were Villains*, adopt group norms under social pressure. In these examples, conformity leads to morally questionable decisions and significant personal consequences, illustrating the powerful impact social conformity can have on an individual's behaviour.

Moreover, Chakraborty introduces the factors "social acceptance and belongingness" and "the desire to be perceived as competent or knowledgeable" (19), which are crucial for Richard's choice. He adapts his beliefs to align with the norms set by

and expectations of his friends. Richard's conformity to the group's activities is less about genuine enthusiasm and more about fitting in with his peers, fearing isolation. Near the end of the film, Richard's desire to belong and fear of consequences and authority collide. To avoid punishment from his parents and Mr. Nolan, he fully embraces conformity to school rules and expectations. While saving himself, Richard betrays the Dead Poets and wrongfully accuses Mr. Keating of being responsible for Neil's suicide (*DPS* 01:54:09). This suggests that under authoritative pressure, an individual's original beliefs might also be reinforced and cause them to turn on their peers.

It is important to note that Richard's fear-driven choice to conform is not without consequences. He is isolated from his only friends, paralleling the Dark Academia trope of characters facing alienation when deviating from peer-imposed values and norms. For instance, in *The Secret History*, Bunny Corcoran's refusal to conform leads to his exclusion from the group and eventually his murder. In *If We Were Villains*, protagonist Oliver Marks becomes increasingly alienated from his peers after admitting to a crime he did not commit, resulting in a ten-year prison sentence. According to Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary (521), the "exclusion to punish" is a common pattern within our modern society. It means to strengthen and clarify the steadfastness of a group's values. This suggests that separation and isolation from the familiar social sphere is a common practice or reaction to severe violations of set norms within a civilised group. In *Dead Poets Society*, Richard has violated the values of his peer group by conforming to the rules of the highest authority, the teachers and parents. As a result of his cowardice and lack of integrity, the aforementioned isolated prison-like experience is only furthered.

Teaching 'Carpe Diem': John Keating's Call to Break Conformity

Some of the other students discover alternatives to the controlling atmosphere at Welton thanks to Professor Keating. As a former student of the Academy, Keating is familiar with its crushing philosophy of fostering academic success and acts as a counterpart to the oppressive system of teachers and parents. Immediately upon his arrival, he challenges the students' conformity by implementing unconventional teaching methods and introducing them to a different, more free-spirited way of life. His most significant impact lies in triggering the need to break free of conformity in his students. It inspires their continuous claim of autonomy and their individual journeys to pursue their happiness and passions. This central topic in the film takes shape in a multitude of ways. Once set in

motion, it reveals its impact, most notably through the revival of the Dead Poets Society. The film's Dark Academia elements are evident as Keating encourages self-discovery and intellectual rebellion against authoritative, oppressive norms.

Keating's teachings start with and centre on the philosophy of 'carpe diem', or 'seize the day'. Throughout the film, the iconic Latin phrase is mentioned frequently, which supports the internalisation of its significance in the students' minds. The phrase gradually gives them the courage to do what they used to deem impossible—breaking free of the pressure of living according to external standards and expectations to instead pursue happiness and individual expression. Keating first introduces 'carpe diem' to his students' vocabulary and mindset by showing them a photograph of deceased former Welton alumni, stressing the inevitability of death (*DPS* 00:14:55). He urges them to “make [their] lives extraordinary” (00:16:26), meaning he wants them to expand their horizons and not let their fears hold them back. Keating familiarises his students with these two concepts by taking them outside of the traditional classroom (00:12:10, 00:50:27, 00:58:01, 01:03:38), highlighting the innovative and unconventional nature of his teaching methods in contrast to Welton's strict standards. Tellingly, this seemingly simple gesture leaves a lasting impression on the students' minds.

The understanding of his philosophy is deepened through unconventional activities on school grounds: having his students kick a ball while reciting poetry (*DPS* 00:51:01), ripping out the introduction pages to poetry of a school-issued book (00:22:55), and yelling a “barbaric yawp” during class time (00:56:14). He even asks his students to stand on his desk to view the classroom—and life—from different perspectives (00:43:26) and to be addressed with “O Captain! My Captain!” (00:12:57). This is an allusion to a poem of the same name by Walt Whitman, which is an expression of grief due to a tragic loss and a reminder that even peace comes at a cost: “From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won; / Exult O shores, and ring O bells! / But I with mournful tread, / Walk the deck my Captain lies, / Fallen cold and dead” (lines 20-24). It foreshadows the bittersweet ending of the film, hinting at both a successful journey and some form of loss. Nevertheless, by defying convention with his unconventional methods, Keating continuously aims to deepen the students' courage to explore different perspectives on life. He urges them to take control and to escape conformity even if it bears risks.

To further demonstrate the conformity the students are consciously and subconsciously trapped in, Keating has three students walk in the courtyard (*DPS* 01:03:38). Although initially moving at their own pace, they quickly fall into a unison march, with the remaining classmates rhythmically clapping along. This exercise illustrates how easily subconscious conformity occurs. To live extraordinary lives, the students must refrain from unquestioningly adapting to the majority. Instead, they are encouraged to go through life consciously and according to their own speed and manner. Moreover, by engaging his students in physical action against conformity, they internalise a notion of freedom and grow more comfortable embracing it. Thereby, a deeper sense of self-awareness is fostered. Keating's progressive teaching methods reflect Dark Academia's notion of knowledge and wisdom as something that exists beyond structured, conventional learning, embracing more unconventional ways of thinking and living.

Embracing 'Carpe Diem': Knox Overstreet's Seizing of Courage

In Abigail Anundson's article "Carpe Diem and Coming-of-Age in Dead Poets Society", she notes that Keating acts not only as a teacher but as a mentor (93). This mentorship highlights his nonconformity since he does not adopt the position of a controlling force like most of his colleagues. It also reflects Dark Academia's fascination with unorthodox teachers who challenge the norms of academic institutions, offering students an alternative path. Through poetry and literature, Keating inspires and empowers his students, making them aware of a life outside of Welton's conformity and status quo. He challenges them, which in turn motivates them to challenge authoritative structures. By forming personal connections with the students and showing interest in their lives and growth, Keating surpasses the role of a teacher. As a result, the students are more open and willing to follow his philosophy and act upon it.

The willingness to take agency is especially present in Knox. As the story unfolds, the recurring repetition of the phrase 'carpe diem' encourages him. Despite the risk of rejection, Knox is unrelenting in the pursuit of his romantic interest, Chris Noel. In fact, just before taking the first step, he matter-of-factly states "carpe diem" (*DPS* 01:01:52). This moment captures another important element of Dark Academia, which is the intensity of passion and the unyielding pursuit of desires, even against societal expectations. The conscious decision to take action suggests that, although only half of

the film has passed, the teacher's thunderous conviction of his philosophies has already resonated deeply with his students and has begun to take root.

At another point, Knox remarks that success does not matter in his pursuit of Chris—what counts is his courage to try (*DPS* 01:01:56). He takes agency over his own future for the first time and is not afraid of the consequences. Although his rebellion is not academic, it is still of great importance for his further development of the self. Encouraged by Keating's lessons, Knox gains the confidence to take risks, eluding the confining environment he was unwillingly kept in. His bold steadfastness is ultimately rewarded when his romantic relationship blossoms despite the obstacles the couple has to overcome. The personal growth and development in the face of adversity that is characteristic of Knox is true for most members of the Dead Poets Society. As they begin to challenge authority and societal expectations, they move toward self-discovery and fulfilment.

Breaking Free of Conformity

The revival of Keating's old club, Dead Poets Society, is a direct manifestation of the students' need to break free. It resonates strongly with the core themes of Dark Academia like hidden knowledge, rituals, and the pursuit of artistic freedom. The club offers a safe space to explore interests and creative processes while providing a glimpse of life beyond Welton's strict order. Meeting regularly in a cave, the young students recite poetry by famous poets (*DPS* 00:39:50, 00:39:01), improvise music (00:59:58), smoke and drink (00:59:02), and bring girls to party (01:08:14), engaging in typical teenage rebellion.

Each meeting begins with reading the opening message the original founders had taken from a passage in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, which is: "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"² (*DPS* 00:36:50).² This is a declaration of freedom for

² In *Dead Poets Society*, Thoreau's text was shortened. This deliberate change likely reflects the screenwriter's aim to emphasise the core idea of embracing life without distractions, making it more memorable for both the students and the audience. The original passage reads: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness

the Dead Poets and a guideline for the way of life they wish to pursue. It speaks to the longing for a deeper, more meaningful existence. Since Keating was part of the original Dead Poets Society, these ideas of freedom strongly resonate with his teachings in and out of class.

The regular meetings as a united group allow the students to seize autonomy since, in this context, they hold the power. By contributing with readings chosen by themselves, poetry written and performed by themselves, and having full authority over the meetings, they claim autonomy over parts of their lives. Although Neil initiates and organises the revival, he does not impose authority. Each member's voice is valued and they have equal opportunities to participate, making the structure relatively democratic. What is most important is that the meetings bring forth some of the students' hidden and suppressed character traits, which at their core are creative, witty, passionate, and clever. By participating, they refuse to comply with and thus break free of Welton's strict regulations since the meetings are secret and off-campus during curfew. This marks the start of their rebellion against authority. The Dead Poets translate the concept of seizing the day into reality by following their passions and interests until the very end of the film.

Neil applies this newfound freedom to his daily life by following his acting passion. Cast as Puck in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he is able to express his creative nature (DPS 00:52:05). That way, he escapes academic and parental pressure, finding a world where conformity is completely absent. This pushes him out of his comfort zone and fosters personal growth, satisfying his need to break free. By pursuing acting and leading a life outside the academic sphere, Neil rebels against his main oppressor, his father. Mr. Perry only learns of his son's play the night before the performance (01:22:29), which is an important step for Neil toward claiming autonomy. His performance becomes a symbolic act of defiance, representing the yearning for freedom and a life outside the predetermined path laid out for him.

Failed Attempts and Unified Resistance

As already indicated, defiance against the pressure of conformity does not always end well. Neil's struggle for a more autonomous life ends tragically when his demanding

to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have *somewhat hastily* concluded that it is the chief end of man here to "glorify God and enjoy him forever." (Thoreau 93-4).

father learns of his son's rebellion. After Neil's performance, Mr. Perry announces his son's withdrawal from Welton and the enrolment at a military academy as a punishment for Neil's defiance (*DPS* 01:40:25). Being threatened with losing his newly gained sense of self-determination and forced into an even more discipline-conforming environment, Neil commits suicide. This is his final act of autonomy and his last resort to retain a sense of power. The pressure to conform and the inability to act outside of his father's control become too much for him to bear. Therefore, after having had a taste of freedom, continuing a life under previous conditions seems impossible. Neil's suicide serves as a wake-up call to the destructive power of an authoritative instance that enforces oppression and the obedience of the individual. It also resonates with *Dark Academia's* themes of intellectual freedom, tragedy, and self-destruction.

Following Neil's death, Mr. Perry demands an investigation into the matter (*DPS* 01:52:52). The students are individually questioned by Mr. Nolan in the presence of their parents, facing immense pressure from the authoritative figures. Rule-embracing Richard is unable to withstand the pressure and falsely inculcates Mr. Keating. More specifically, he blames the unconventional teaching methods and Keating's encouragement to revive the Society as the sole reasons for Neil's suicide. Richard urges his peers to follow suit to protect themselves rather than doing what is just (01:54:32). Enraged by his friend's cowardice and betrayal, *Dead Poets* member Charlie Dalton attacks him and faces expulsion as a result (01:55:21). Yet, Charlie's outburst is a sign of his increasing courage to stand up for his beliefs. He breaks free of Welton's oppressive environment and instead takes agency over his own life.

Through “direct forms of influence, such as demands [and] threats” (“group pressure”), Mr. Nolan pressures the remaining members into signing a form that imputes all blame on Mr. Keating, leading to his dismissal. It is noteworthy that in the film, it is left open whether Todd conforms to the pressure (*DPS* 01:59:30). When consulting Schulman's original screenplay, his conviction of Keating's innocence becomes evident. Todd is unwilling to give his signature, declaring “I won't sign it” several times during his meeting with the headmaster (Schulman 128-9). Although, in the script, Todd is faced with disciplinary probation as punishment, he never conforms to the demands of the authority (129).

The question remains whether Mr. Keating's teachings will have a lasting impact on the oppressed students, or if by signing their name, they sign away their autonomy

once again. While the narrative makes no explicit argument, the film's final moments suggest that Keating's efforts were not entirely fruitless. Todd displays his newly gained confidence to (literally) stand up for his values when he copies one of Keating's teaching approaches. Climbing onto his desk, Todd exclaims, "O Captain! My Captain!" (*DPS* 02:03:23), paying the teacher his respect and expressing loyalty and thankfulness. Acting as an initiator and leader for the first time, Todd's meaningful gesture inspires the members of the Dead Poets Society (except Richard) to mimic his actions. Gradually, more classmates follow suit. They finally stand united against their oppressor, Mr. Nolan, who desperately tries to restore order to the classroom (02:03:57). These final moments suggest that in the previous scene of the film in Mr. Nolan's office, Todd remains steadfast and does not sign his name. His new strength and beliefs empower him to finally withstand the pressure of authority.

Conclusion

In *Dead Poets Society*, Peter Weir and Tom Schulman strikingly depict the intense struggle between the pressure of conformity and the desperate need for freedom and autonomy. The film incorporates key elements of the Dark Academia genre, showcasing an elite academic setting, the pursuit of knowledge and self-discovery, and the consequences of resisting or succumbing to societal expectations and authority. Embodied by Mr. Nolan and Mr. Perry, Welton Academy stifles the students' freedom and expression of individuality through rigorous adherence to tradition, discipline, and rules. The opposing force is Mr. Keating. He continuously challenges his students to break free of conscious and subconscious conformity with progressive, unconventional teaching methods and life philosophies centred around the liberating phrase 'carpe diem'. Keating acts as a catalyst for the students' journeys toward self-discovery and self-expression.

The film highlights various responses to Keating's teachings. Knox's unrelenting pursuit of Chris is a prime example of the power of embracing 'carpe diem'. Gaining confidence, he exceeds social expectations for his abilities and breaks free of conformity. Todd also undergoes a transformation, evolving from a shy and quiet boy into an outspoken young man who is no longer afraid to stand up to authority. His newfound confidence underscores the impact of Keating's mentorship. What is more, Neil's endless struggle for a self-determined life and his subsequent suicide highlight the destructive consequences of oppressive (parental) control. It emphasises the powerlessness a person

can feel in the face of imposed conformity. The revival of the Dead Poets Society symbolises the students' inherent wish for a space to safely express their creativity and seize autonomy. This act of rebellion is an important step toward independence and self-expression. The exclamation, "O Captain! My Captain" (DPS 02:03:23) in the film's final scene functions as a last appreciation of Keating's impactful philosophies. This meaningful gesture highlights the students' enduring transformation and marks their final act of defiance against Welton's oppression. In contrast to his peers, Richard yields to the pressure of conformity during the investigation into Neil's suicide. He betrays his friends and falsely accuses Mr. Keating, which emphasises the power of fear and the need to self-preserve under authoritative pressure. Richard's exclusion from his peer group illustrates the personal cost of submitting to authority. Additionally, it points out the ease with which an individual can betray their values under pressure and stress.

The constant struggle between oppressive conformity and the desperate need to break free is draining. Nevertheless, the Dead Poets exemplify how to achieve a sense of autonomy in various ways, although some have to compromise. After experiencing internal and external battles as well as personal growth, the students learn the importance of staying true to their values and of living a more extraordinary life. Watching the film may inspire the viewer to reflect on their own level of conformity to societal norms and consider how it might be limiting their autonomy and self-expression. Mr. Keating's impact and legacy, however, serve as constant reminders of the liberating and impactful power of standing up for one's beliefs. It highlights the importance of pursuing dreams and overcoming struggles to experience growth and freedom.

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