

Universidad Nacional de Cuyo

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Módulo de Estudios Culturales

Cultural Studies V

Analysis of the film

DEAD

POETS

SOCIETY

Directed by Peter Weir

June 2000

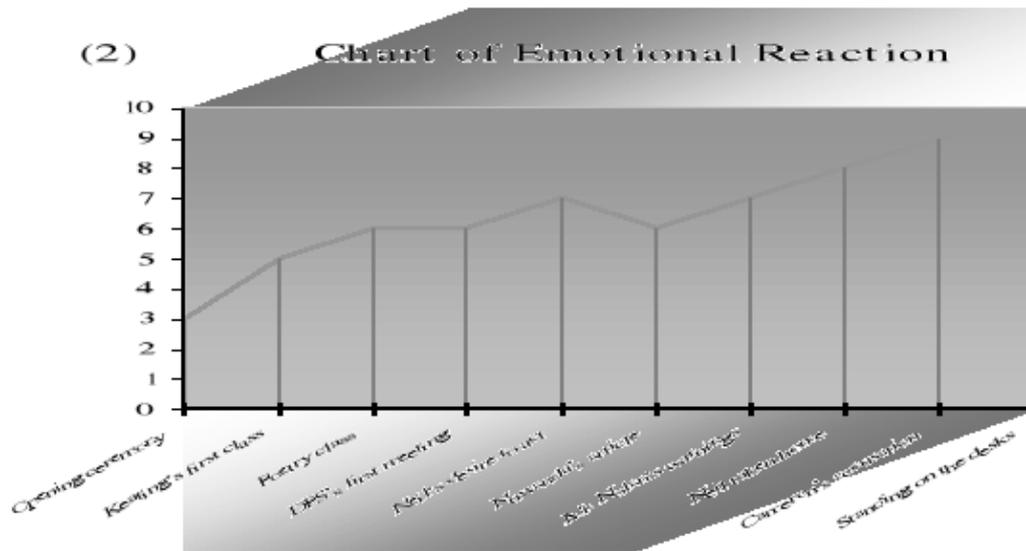
- Plot

This story takes place at Welton School, a very traditional preparatory school for boys in the United States. After the summer holidays of 1959, John Keating, former student at the institution, enters the school as the new English teacher. With his unconventional teaching methods, he inspires his students to act as individuals. He encourages them to think for themselves, to find new points of view, to discover their own ways and feelings and to "seize the day".

Given this whole new perspective on life, a group of boys start to follow their own ideas, which are in some way at odds with the conservative policies of the institution and with their parents' expectations. They form a new Dead Poets Society, a kind of literary club that holds secret meetings in a cave. Neil decides to take part in a play in spite of his father's opposition to his many extracurricular activities. Knox decides to do whatever he has to do in order to conquer the girl he has fallen in love with. Todd overcomes his shyness and throws away his parent's present. Mr. Keating's classes call the attention of the other teachers of the school and of the principal, Mr. Nolan.

The conflict arises when one of the boys, Charlie Dalton, who has changed his name to "Nuwanda" arrives to a meeting of the Dead Poets Society with two girls, and tells the boys that he published in the school magazine a very daring article signed by the Dead Poets Society. Dalton is punished severely, but he does not reveal the names of the members of the group. Mr. Keating is warned by Mr. Nolan to drop his unorthodox teaching methods.

After the play, Neil confronts his father but he is unable to tell him about his ambitions and he finally commits suicide. His parents ask the school to investigate the case and the boys are intimidated to accuse Mr. Keating of being a bad influence on them and of causing Neil's death. Mr. Keating is forced to leave the school but his students have a chance to show their loyalty to him and to what he has taught them.



Scene 1 – Opening Ceremony

Some students enter the ceremony room carrying the banners of the four pillars of the school: Tradition, Honour, Discipline and Excellence. Another student plays the bagpipe. A man passes on the "light of knowledge" to the new students.

Scene 2 – Keating's first class

Mr Keating has his class follow him to the hall where there are photographs of former students of the school. There he presents himself, he has one of the students read part of a poem and teaches his students to "seize the day".

Scene 3 – Poetry class

Mr. Keating asks his students to rip off the introduction to their poetry books. He tells them they have to learn to appreciate poetry by themselves.

Scene 4 – DPS's first meeting

The boys improvise a first meeting of the Dead Poets Society in the cave. They eat and smoke, they read some poetry and tell frightening stories, they sing a poem like a rap, and Charlie shows a poster of a girl.

Scene 5 – Neil's desire to act

Neil gets the part of Puck in the play "A Midsummer Night's Dream". He needs permission from his parents and he knows that his father will not allow him to act, but he is so excited that he decides to write the letters

himself.

Scene 6 – Nuwanda's article

During a meeting of the Dead Poets Society, Charlie arrives with two girls. He wants to impress them: he changes his name to Nuwanda and he recites poetry for the girls. Then he tells the rest of the group that he has published an article for the school magazine asking that girls are allowed into Welton, and that it is signed "Dead Poets Society".

Scene 7 – Mr. Nolan's warnings

Mr. Nolan, the principal, warns Mr. Keating to drop his teaching methods and to follow the school's curriculum.

Scene 8 – Neil taken home

After the play Neil is very happy. His father is very angry at him. As they are heading for the car to go home, Mr. Keating approaches to congratulate Neil on his performance, but Mr. Perry asks him to get away from his son.

Scene 9 – Cameron's accusation

The boys are talking about what happened to Neil and how the school will want to blame someone for it when Cameron arrives. He has been talking to the principal and because of the school's code of honour he has said everything he knows about the society and Mr. Keating's influence on the class.

Scene 10 – Standing on the desks

Mr. Keating comes into the classroom to pick up some things. Mr. Nolan is in charge of the course and makes the boys read the introduction of the book of poetry that Mr. Keating had made them rip out. Mr. Keating looks disappointed, but as he is leaving Todd turns to him and tells him they were forced to accuse him. Todd stands on his desk and many of the other boys do the same. Mr. Keating thanks them and leaves.

(3) Sample Script:

Scene N: Neil's argument with his father

Characters: Mr. Perry

Neil Perry

Mrs. Perry

In the study at the Perry's house. There's a big bookcase at the back, a small table at the left, next to a window. The big desk is at the front and there are two armchairs, one at the back and the other to the right next to the door. It is the night after the play. Mrs. Perry is waiting for Mr. Perry and Neil. She is looking out of the window and she has been smoking and drinking. She puts out her cigarette as Mr. Perry and Neil enter the house. She sits on a sofa at the back.

Mr. Perry

(annoyed, to Neil)

We're trying very hard to understand why is it that you insist on defying us. Whatever the reason, we are not gonna let you ruin your life. Tomorrow I'll be withdrawing you from Welton and enrolling you in Braden Military School. You are going to Harvard and you're gonna be a doctor.

Neil

(looks helplessly at Mrs. Perry, then at his father again)

But, that's ten more years Father, that's a lifetime!

Mr. Perry

Oh, stop it! Don't be so dramatic. You make it sound as a prison term. You don't understand, Neil. You have opportunities that I never even dreamt of and I'm not going to

Neil

(stands up, interrupting Mr. Perry)

I've got to tell you

Mr. Perry

let you waste them!

NEIL

what I feel!

Mrs. Perry

(standing up, but barely audible)

We've been so worried about

Mr. Perry

What? Tell me what you feel! What is it? Is it more of this this acting business? Because you can forget that!

What?

Neil

(shrugs and smiles faintly)

Nothing.

Mr. Perry

(annoyed)

Nothing?

(looks at his wife and then takes his hat)

Well then let's go to bed.

(Mr. Perry exits. Mrs. Perry gets closer to Neil as if to console him)

Neil

(To her mother who is at his back, but more to himself)

I was good. I was really good.

Mrs. Perry

(nods sadly)

Go and get some sleep.

(Mrs. Perry leaves the room)

(4) Sample Shooting Script:

Scene N: *Neil's argument with his father*

Cast: Mrs. Perry, Neil's mother

Mr. Perry, Neil's father

Neil Perry

Takes: 25

Total time: 2minutes, 42 seconds.

Take 1 . Establishing shot of the Perry's house. It begins with a CLOSE – UP of a small table where there is a photoframe with a picture of Neil and his parents at Welton. There is also a lamp, a packet of cigarettes, an ashtray full of cigarette ends and half a drink in a glass of whisky. There is a travelling upwards to reveal a window next to the table and the back of Mrs. Perry, who is looking out of the window as her husband and son arrive at the house. There's a MEDIUM SHOT of Mrs. Perry finishing her cigarette nervously and then the camera follows her as she sits down on an armchair.

Take 2. A short TRAVELLING in which the camera follows Mr. Perry and Neil as they enter the room. Then a LONG SHOT of the whole study room with Mr. Perry standing on the left, Neil on the right and Mrs. Perry sitting at the back against the bookcase, her image a little blurred. Neil sits down on an armchair. Mr. Perry looks annoyed.

Mr. Perry

We're trying very hard to understand why is it that you insist on defying us. Whatever the reason, we are not gonna let you ruin your life.

Take 3. MEDIUM SHOT from a HIGH–ANGLE of Neil seated.

Mr. Perry (voice-over)

Tomorrow I'll be withdrawing you from Welton and enrolling you in Braden Military School.

Take 4. MEDIUM SHOT of Mr. PERRY from a LOW-ANGLE.

Mr. Perry

You are going to Harvard and you're gonna be a doctor.

Take 5. MEDIUM SHOT from a HIGH-ANGLE of Neil, who turns to his mother as if asking for help.

Take 6. MEDIUM SHOT of Mrs. Perry looking helplessly at Mr. Perry and not daring to look at her son.

Take 7. MEDIUM SHOT from a HIGH-ANGLE of Neil still looking at his mother and then turning to his father.

Neil

But, that's ten more years
Father, that's a

Take 8. MEDIUM SHOT of Mr. PERRY from a LOW-ANGLE.

Neil (voice-over)

lifetime!

Mr. Perry

Oh, stop it! Don't be so dramatic. You make it sound as a

Take 9. MEDIUM SHOT from a HIGH-ANGLE of Neil looking desperate.

Mr. Perry(voice-over)

prison term.

Take 10. MEDIUM SHOT of Mr. PERRY from a LOW-ANGLE.

Mr. Perry

You don't understand, Neil. You have opportunities that I

Take 11. The camera follows Neil as he stands up.

Mr. Perry(voice-over)

never even dreamt of and I'm not going to

Neil

I've got to tell you

Take 12. OVER-THE-SHOULDER SHOT of Mr. PERRY (as seen from behind Neil), still with a slight LOW-ANGLE.

Mr. Perry

let you waste them!

Neil (voice-over)

what I feel!

Take 13. LONG SHOT of the study room with Mr. Perry standing on the left, Neil standing on the right and Mrs. Perry at the back. Mrs. Perry stands up.

Mrs. Perry

We've been so worried about

Mr. Perry

What? Tell me what you feel!

Take 14. Close-up of Neil's face.

Mr. Perry(voice-over)

What is it?

Take 15. OVER-THE-SHOULDER SHOT of Mr. PERRY.

Take 16. Close-up of Mrs. Perry, who is crying.

Take 17. Close-up of Neil. He looks at his mother and then at his father again.

Mr. Perry (voice-over)

Is it more of this acting business? Because you can forget that!

Take 18. OVER-THE-SHOULDER SHOT of Mr. PERRY.

Mr. Perry.

What?

Take 19. Close-up of Neil. He shrugs and smiles faintly.

Neil

Nothing.

Take 20. OVER-THE-SHOULDER SHOT of Mr. PERRY.

Take 21. There is a short TRAVELLING backwards as Neil sits down again. He is holding Puck's crown with both hands and his eyes wander away from his father's look.

Take 22. MEDIUM SHOT of Mr. PERRY. He looks at his wife and then at Neil with a mixture of hopelessness and exasperation.

Mr. Perry

Nothing?

Take 23. LONG SHOT of the study room with Mr. Perry standing on the left, Neil sitting on the right and Mrs. Perry at the back. Mr. Perry looks at his wife then grabs his hat from the desk.

Mr. Perry

Well then let's go to bed.

Mr. Perry walks towards the door.

Take24. LONG SHOT of Perry seated. Mr. Perry's legs are seen on the left as he leaves the room.

Take 25. The camera follows Mrs Perry, who walks towards the door, looking at Neil with a sad face. She stops at the door and crouches behind Neil. This results in a CLOSE-UP of Neil's face on the right side of the screen and Mrs. Perry's face on the left but lower and further away.

Neil

(To her mother who is at his back, but more to himself)

I was good. I was really good.

Mrs. Perry nods.

Mrs. Perry

Go and get some sleep.

Mrs. Perry leaves the room, but the camera does not follow her. CLOSE-UP of Neil, with a tormented expression.

(5) Director's Page

Name of the movie: Dead Poets Society

Director: Peter Weir

Scene N: Neil's argument with his father.

Takes: 25

Set: Studio: The study room in the Perry's house..

Effect: night effect.

Cast	Takes	Costumes	Accessories	Props
Carla Belver (as Mrs. Perry)	1, 2, 6, 13, 16, 23, 25.	-pink twinset -black skirt -black shoes.	-pearl necklace -watch -handkerchief	-a photoframe -two lamps -a glass of whiskey
Kurtwood Smith (as Mr. Perry)	1, 2, 4, 8, 10, 12, 13, 15, 18, 20, 22, 23.	-dark suit -white shirt -tie -dark overcoat.	-scarf -hat	-an ashtray -a packet of cigarettes -two armchairs -a wall bookcase
Robert Sean Leonard (as Neil)	1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 14, 17, 19, 21, 23, 24, 25.	-T-shirt -trousers -Montgomery	-Puck's crown	-a desk -a telephone -a calendar -pictures -curtains -a sofa -a green carpet

Appendix I

On framing and power relationships in the scene analysed

	Take 2	Take 13	Take 23	
	LONG SHOTS: The dominant figure is the father, who is standing on the left, all the time. Neil, on the right is seated, then he stands up, and then he sits again, defeated by his father. The woman remains at the back. She stands up at one point, but never gains any dominance.			
Mr. Perry				
	Takes 4,8,10,22			Takes 12,15,18,20
	MEDIUM SHOTS from a LOW-ANGLE: an image of power and superiority		OVER-THE-SHOULDER SHOTS, also from a LOW-ANGLE: even whan Neil is standing, they can not be equals.	

The three
characters

Mrs. Perry				
	Take 6		Take 16	Take 25
	MEDIUM SHOT: looking at Mr. Perry and Neil, she depends on them, there is nothing she can do by herself in this situation.		CLOSE-UP of Mrs. Perry crying	Behind Neil: she does not dare face her son, she has even less power than he does.
Neil				
	Takes 3,5,7,9	Takes 21, 24	Take 14, 17, 19	Take 25
	MEDIUM SHOTS from a HIGH-ANGLE: showing his impotence.		CLOSE-UP of his face: leads us to experiment his feelings and thoughts more closely. A very dramatic image.	

Appendix II

Metaphore

There are three consecutive images of a flock of birds flying. The following image shows the students at Welton going down the stairs. The juxtaposition of these images emphasises the fact that the students do not feel free at Welton.

Later, when Knox escapes from the school in his bike to see Chris, he goes through a flock of birds that fly away. This image emphasises Knox's feelings of freedom.

Symbols

The choice of the play "A Midsummer Night's Dream" is symbolic, most of all because of the last speech that Neil delivers practically talking to his father, who does not understand his passion for acting.

If we shadows have offended,

Think but this, and all is mended,

That you have but slumber'd here

While these visions did appear.

And this weak and idle theme,

No more yielding but a dream,

Gentles, do not reprehend:

If you pardon, we will mend:

And, as I am an honest Puck,

If we have unearned luck

Now to 'scape the serpent's tongue,

We will make amends ere long;

Else the Puck a liar call;

So, good night unto you all.

Give me your hands, if we be friends,

And Robin shall restore amends.

The image of Neil putting on Puck's crown and lowering his head resembles that of Christ yielding to death.

Ellipsis

Neil's death is discovered by these clues:

- smoke rises from behind the desk,
- Mr. Perry smells the air with puzzled look
- The gun is lying behind the desk
- Neil's hand can be seen behind the desk.

Contrast

Most of the film's meanings are emphasised by means of contrasts.

- The solemnity of the opening ceremony, with the students reciting the four pillars: Tradition, Honour, Discipline and Excellence is contrasted with the meeting in Neil's room, where the students tell Todd of their four pillars: Travesty, Horror, Decadence, Excrement.
- Following the class in which Mr. Keating encourages his students to "add their own verse to the history of humanity", the students are seen in the dining room, reciting all together the prayer before the meal.
- When Neil goes down to the study where he is going to kill himself, he is shown from behind, and all the rooms are in darkness. There is a close-up of his hands holding a key and a medium shot while he stares at the gun he will use. When his father hears a noise and starts looking for him, there are close-ups of his face and he is seen from the front as he descends the stairs, which results in a low-angle shot. Mr. Perry turns on the lights as he walks around the house.

(2)

Chart of Emotional Reaction

