

# Dead Poets Society (1989)



**Directed by** Peter Weir **Genre:** Drama **Runtime:** 128 mins **Country:** USA

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In 1959, the Welton Academy is a staid but well-respected school where education is a pragmatic and rather dull affair. Several of the students, however, have their thoughts on the learning process (and life itself) changed when a new teacher comes to the school. John Keating (Robin Williams) is an unconventional educator who tears chapters of his textbooks and asks his students to stand on their desks to see the world from a new angle. Keating introduces his students to poetry, and his free-thinking attitude and the liberating philosophies of the authors he introduces to his class have a profound effect on his students, especially Todd (Ethan Hawke), who would like to be a writer; Neil (Robert Sean Leonard), who dreams of being an actor, despite the objections of his father; Knox (Josh Charles), a hopeless romantic; Steven (Allelon Ruggiero), an intellectual who learns to use his heart as well as his head; Charlie (Gale Hansen), who begins to lose his blasé attitude; unconventional Gerard (James Waterston); and practical Richard (Dylan Kussman). Keating urges his students to seize the day and live their lives boldly; but when this philosophy leads to an unexpected tragedy, headmaster Mr. Nolan (Norman Lloyd) fires Keating, and his students leap to his defense. Dead Poets Society was nominated for four Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Actor for Williams; it won one, for Tom Schulman's original screenplay.

Discussion:

1. Which of the students did you find most interesting as a character? Why?
2. Which scene in the film did you find most memorable? Why?
3. What is your view of the character John Keating, the teacher?

Some have described him as inspiring and liberating; others as egotistical and manipulative. Is he a "good teacher"? Have you had teachers like him?

4. What do you think of the philosophy of "Carpe Diem" ("Seize the Day").?
5. What is the main message of the film?

## Ode I-XI "Carpe Diem" by Horace

HORACE (65—8 B.C.) is regarded by many as the best Roman poet.

*The most famous of Horace's odes uses agricultural metaphors to urge us to embrace the pleasures available in everyday life instead of relying on remote aspirations for the future - hence his immortal motto "Carpe Diem", or "pluck the day". Here are two English translation of the Latin:*

1. Don't question what ends the gods have in store for me and you, Leuconoe, and don't mess with Babylonian numerology. It's much better just to submit to it, whatever is to come, whether Jove has many winters in store for you, or whether this is your last--even now as the Tyrrhenian sea breaks upon the rocks. So be wise, pour the wine, and check your long hopes to this brief moment. For while we talk, precious time passes us by: sieze the day with as little faith in the future as possible.

Leuconoe - name of the person he is "talking" to

Tyrrhenian - name of the sea

2. Ask not - we cannot know - what end the gods have set for you, for me; nor attempt the Babylonian reckonings, Leuconoë. How much better to endure whatever comes, whether Jupiter grants us additional winters or whether this is our last, which now wears out the Tuscan Sea upon the barrier of the cliffs! Be wise, strain the wine; and since life is brief, prune back far-reaching hopes! Even while we speak, envious time has passed: pluck the day, putting as little trust as possible in tomorrow!

Shakespeare's version of the theme takes the following form in "Twelfth Night":

What is love? 'Tis not hereafter;  
Present mirth has present laughter  
What's to come is still unsure  
In delay there lies no plenty;  
Then come and kiss me, sweet and twenty,  
Youth's a stuff will not endure.

"Carpe diem" has become the term used to describe any literature with this theme.