

EXTENDED ESSAY

Research Question: *To what extent does the novel “Dead Poets Society” criticise the traditional education system in the United States by highlighting the conflict between individuality and conformity within the context of a conservative American school setting?*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Dead Poets Society is a novel set in 1959 at 'Welton Academy' in Vermont, United States. N. H. Kleinbaum is the author of the book adaptation of the original screenplay by scenarist Tom Schulman. Tom Schulman was inspired by his own experiences as a student at an elite boarding school similar to Welton Academy (Scriptapart, n.d.). Later, N. H. Kleinbaum, an American author who specialises in novelising popular films and television shows, adapted the screenplay into a novel. This extended essay is based solely on the novel adapted by N. H. Kleinbaum, as some scenes and characters were expanded while maintaining the core story and themes, which help explore conformity and individualism through the inclusion of internal monologue and literary techniques. (SoBrief, n.d.).

Welton Academy is a fictional preparatory all-boys boarding school portrayed as a highly prestigious institution that relies heavily on its one-hundred-year-old, outdated, and narrow-minded traditions, making the school overly strict and inhibiting. Most of the time, parents have made significant investments in their child's education; thus, they are subjected to high expectations. The traditional features of the school, which had not been updated over many decades, limit the boys' individuality and force certain characteristics upon them, while also catalysing extremist approaches by authorities towards education and social life. The traditional pillars consist of 'tradition,' 'discipline,' 'honour,' and 'excellence,' and they leave the students no place to follow their aspirations and interests (Nevil, 2026).

The story begins with the students arriving at the school's opening ceremony, where Principal Gale Nolan presents the four pillars and introduces them to their new English teacher, John Keating. Inspired by Keating's unconventional teaching style, Neil Perry, Todd Anderson, Knox Overstreet, Charlie Dalton, Stephen Meeks, Gerard Pitts, and Richard Cameron discover an old secret literature club called the "Dead Poets Society." They begin to challenge the authority as they rebel by nonconforming to their school's restricting ideals, they revive the society where they meet at a hidden cave to read poetry, discuss literature, and share their deepest desires and dreams. Neil Perry aspires to be part of the school's theatre production and dreams of pursuing acting; however, his strict father insists that he follow a path in medicine. Likewise, Todd Anderson is an anxious student who lacks confidence and feels overshadowed by his valedictorian brother. Roommates Neil and Todd become great friends as they find support from Keating in their struggles and situations, who encourages them to follow their

passions and break free from the obstacles holding them back. Despite the constant support from Keating, Neil finds himself trapped by his father's expectations, leading to his suicide, provoking the students, teachers, and parents. Blame falls on John Keating for allegedly corrupting the students and sparking an uprising by members of the Dead Poets Society (Nevil, 2026).

2. METHODOLOGY

Originally a screenplay written by Tom Schulman, the book adaptation of "Dead Poets Society" by N. H. Kleinbaum includes detailed descriptions of the characters' feelings and thoughts that are significant to the research question. In order to address the research question, "To what extent does "Dead Poets Society" critique the traditional educational system in America, and in what ways does it highlight the conflict between individuality and conformity within the context of a conservative American school setting?", this essay will be structured upon the "New Historicism" literary theory.

New historicism is a theory that draws upon the vitality of both the historical context in which the text was created and the contemporary context of the readers in which it is read. (EBSCO, 2024) Throughout this essay, a new historicist lens is employed to analyse this novel and interpret the power dynamics of 1950s America. The following steps will take place throughout the process of writing this extended essay: Firstly, the historical context regarding the late 1950s is viewed through the new historicist lens, where the setting of the story has shaped the narrative. The paranoia-inducing atmosphere of the "Red Scare" and McCarthyism is utilised as context to analyse Welton Academy as a representative of the political and social implications of the time period. Secondly, the themes of individuality and conformity will be analysed, with a focus on the distinctions of education in Welton Way and Keating Way, highlighting the microcosm of the American educational system after the Second World War as an instrument of control. Following, the new historicist approach is taken through the analysis of Keating, questioning whether he genuinely challenges conformist authority or whether the novel's narrative is biased in magnifying his resistance.

3. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE 1950s

Dead Poets Society is set in 1959 during the Cold War, when the public had elevated fear concerning the alleged spread of communist and socialist ideologies within the United States (Martin, 2025). The properties of the Cold War not only affected family life, but they also seeped into the educational system of the United States. Struggling with the clash of communism and capitalism due to the Cold War with the Soviet Union (USSR), anti-communist practices in the nation took an extremist approach. Teachers who were assumed to be associated with communism were interrogated, and approximately 600 teachers lost their jobs due to McCarthyism, an approach that caused people to stand trial as guilty without solid proof (Kudlik et al., 2016). The novel's portrayal of John Keating's accusations is parallel to the McCarthyistic realities of the post-war era: Keating was dismissed from his job solely because his teaching was not aligned with the authorities, highly similar to the cases related to McCarthy's "communist witch hunt." The novel demonstrates the critical nature of post-war narratives through the suicide of the protagonist, Neil. Questions are raised on whether Keating's advice and provocations to not conform were the reason for his death, or whether the deep guilt and obligatory burden his father has imposed on him led to it. (Nevil, 2026).

4. INDIVIDUALITY AND CONFORMITY

In 'Dead Poets Society,' the themes of individuality and conformity are two of the main centres of interest explored by the writer. Various characters are depicted as figures who conform to society and its expectations; others are portrayed as individuals who aim to escape the norms and question the world around them. Characters who experience pressure to conform from their family and teachers often face internal and external conflicts, which can lead to self-doubt and discouragement.

The story revolves around Professor Keating, the new English teacher, who is the only teacher to advocate for individuality. Keating is not favoured by the other teachers due to his unorthodox approaches to education. He is seen to be unprofessional and childish; he encourages students to address him by the alias "Oh Captain, my captain" (Kleinbaum, 1989, p. 24), he makes students stand on desks, and he lets them go out of the classroom during study hours. This interactive and challenging way of teaching helps his students be courageous and unique as they learn to use poetry as a way of self-expression, while his rebellious and charming

nature has a questioning influence on them, showing that through the freedom of words and poetry, they can find a voice to challenge authority.

4.1. Individuality versus Conformity in Education

The theme of education in the novel is explored through two conflicting topics. The first one being the “Welton way” and the second one being the “Keating way.”

4.1.1 The Welton Way

The Welton Academy follows a strong and rigorous educational approach that ultimately aims to nurture respected individuals who shadow the same traditions and values as others in the school. The quote by Headmaster Nolan, “The light of knowledge shall be passed from old to young,” (Kleinbaum, 1989, p. 2) reveals the presence of a complete power dynamic, suggesting that students are not supposed to construct new knowledge but rather receive it from older generations and therefore old mindsets, which they are expected to accept without question.

Principal Nolan's claim “At Welton, you will work harder than you have ever worked in your lives, and your reward will be the success that all of us expect from you.” (Kleinbaum, 1989, p. 5) perfectly captures Welton’s aim of controlling students by defining “success” as the achievement of externally imposed desires in the context of channelling socially sanctioned roles that served the power structures of the postwar era. “Success” refers only to materialistic qualities, such as achieving good grades, getting into a prestigious university, and securing a high-paying job. In this manner, the Welton way and the four pillars are specifically designed to help students aspire to the same kind of success and essentially become the same kind of people. The severe difference between the “Welton way of education” and the “Keating way of education” is evident in the rebellious act of Keating, who encourages the boys to tear out the introductory section of their poetry book.

This book presents a mathematical way to measure the greatness of poetry. This scientific and formulaic approach to literature in the textbook perfectly represents Welton Way’s reliance on memorising and mindlessly following rules rather than favouring genuine emotional experiences and individual interpretation. Keating’s encouragement of ripping out the pages provide a viewpoint in which it can be interpreted as a radical act of anti-censorship.

4.1.2 The Keating Way

Unlike the Welton way of teaching, the “Keating way” empowers the students on their journey of self-discovery. His dramatic act of jumping on a desk and shouting “O Captain! My Captain!” reveals his rebellious spirit as he clearly hints at a nonconforming attitude by daring to jump on a desk, while it is frowned upon to even sit informally. Keating’s approach to encouraging rebellion against conformity by showing students the redundancy of labels and calculation techniques in poetry demonstrates an authoritarian disruption from a new historicist perspective.

Keating refers to the liberation of individuality by saying, “This is battle, boys. War! You are souls at critical juncture. Either you will succumb to the will of academic hoi polloi, and the fruit will die on the vine—or you will triumph as individuals.” (Kleinbaum, 1989, p. 40) The use of militaristic terms such as battle, war, succumb, and triumph reveals that individuality is a phenomenon that requires fighting for in the historically hostile environment of the 1950s. The term “hoi polloi” means “the herd,” used in the context of Welton Academy to expostulate the ordinariness and sameness of education and criticise those who choose to ignore their individuality by becoming a part of the authority that imposes conformity. The Keating way aims to teach the Welton students to understand their own feelings, acknowledge them, find what they are passionate about, and not conform to either the school’s authority or their parents’ disbeliefs. He articulates classes where he encourages his students to stand on desks, perform various actions in the courtyard, and shout and yell in class, which slowly helps them unlearn the Welton values.

4.1.3 Carpe Diem

Carpe diem, which means “seize the day” in Latin (Cambridge, 2025), is a famous quote deliberately delivered by John Keating, and it plays a crucial role in depicting the conflict between individuality and conformity. Keating uses this quote to inspire his students to live each day with passion and love, contrary to the Welton values, which makes the students believe in a simple, straightforward model of living their lives. Keating’s interpretation of the quote “Carpe Diem” is that celebration of life over death matters. This philosophy opposes American educational ideals represented by Welton Academy, as “seize the day” uplifts the students to see the world through their individualistic lens and question it.

“I say—drivel! One reads poetry because he is a member of the human race, and the human race is filled with passion! Medicine, law, and banking—these are necessary to sustain life. But poetry, romance, love, beauty? These are what we stay alive for!” (Kleinbaum, 1989, p. 41) Keating expresses that life’s purpose finds meaning, indulged in experience, emotion, and passion; and things that are necessary for life, for instance, the careers that authoritative figures in their life want them to attain, should not be the core of one’s life.

On the other hand, Welton Academy’s system reflects the unyielding traditional American values of the 1950s and is aimed at prioritizing discipline, obedience, and preparation for conventional futures.

4.2. Authority and Conformity

Principal Nolan is an authority figure at Welton Academy who advocates the pillars of tradition, honour, discipline, and excellence. He dedicates his power to maintaining order and forcing conformity on students. “Ah, Mr. Anderson. You have some big shoes to fill, young man. Your brother was one of our best.” (Kleinbaum, 1989, p. 7). “We’re expecting great things of you, Mr. Perry,” the dean said to Neil. “Thank you, Mr. Nolan.” “He won’t disappoint us,” the boy’s father said to Nolan. “Right, Neil?” “I’ll do my best, sir.” (Kleinbaum, 1989, p. 7). These quotes demonstrate how Principal Nolan’s authority controls students and parents through expectations and comparisons. Comparing Todd to his brother immediately weakens him, which is a mannerism that reinforces his insecurity and fear of self-expression. Through the eyes of Neil, Nolan’s expression of “expecting great things” adds additional pressure next to his father’s control. The dialogue pattern in this part demonstrates a power dynamic in which Nolan and the parents speak to each other with authority, while the boys’ responses are limited to overly polite ones; the exchanges are short-lived and faint.

The dialogue between one of the professors and Keating reveals the unfaithfulness of teachers towards youth. He criticises Keating’s teaching approaches by saying, “You take a big risk encouraging them to be artists, John. When they realise that they’re not Rembrandt’s or Shakespeare’s or Mozart’s, they’ll hate you for it.” Rather than trusting students to discover their failures and potentials, the teacher chooses to discourage them from navigating life in their own manner.

The fact that the other professors do not encourage students to think for themselves can also be interpreted in the context of the period in which it is set. The Cold War's influence on society during the second half of the twentieth century, combined with McCarthyism, fostered fear of communism and social turmoil, prompting authorities to demand strict conformity among their citizens, especially youth. During the Cold War, the debate between capitalism and communism was the main driver of upheaval. Similar to the conformism versus individualism themes, the communists were restricted, and anti-communist propaganda was present, while capitalism was favoured in the US. (BBC, 2019)

Considering this, Nolan's strong enforcement of tradition and social order can be said to mirror a society that fears young people's capacity to question capitalism, authority, and the foundations of the political system. The students' embrace of poetry and literature can go beyond rebelling against the principal and their parents; it can be a symbolic rebellion against the oppressive conformity they experience throughout their lives.

4.3. Influence of Literature on Individualism

The meetings of the Dead Poets Society are commenced by a quote from Henry David Thoreau's 'Walden; or Life in the Woods' (1854).

"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." (Kleinbaum, 1989, p.53)

Walden is a memoir that reflects on the author's experiences living in solitude in a small cabin by a lake (Lowne, 2025). John Keating had been a member of the Dead Poets Society when he was a student at Welton Academy, and he actualizes the doctrine that this extract from Thoreau depicts. The writer's claim, "I did not wish to live what was not life," echoes through every step of Keating and the members of the Dead Poets Society's actions as they learn that life must be questioned, stripped down, and experienced authentically.

Neil Perry embodies Thoreau's philosophy clearly when he discovers acting; he feels as if he has finally "sucked the marrow out of life." The quote "The point is that for the first time in my whole life I know what I want, and for the first time I'm gonna do it whether my father wants me to or not! Carpe diem, Todd!" (Kleinbaum, 1989, p.63) depicts the strong influence that Keating's methods for teaching the embracement of individuality have on Neil.

The school play, "A Midsummer Night's Dream," where he gets the role of the mischievous elf, "Puck" is a metaphor for Neil's bubbly and outgoing personality, as Puck enjoys playing jokes on mortals malevolently; he bends rules, creates chaos, and acts outside societal structures. (Bhattacharjee, 2012) It could be said that "puck" is the freedom and spirit that Neil longs for in his real life. On stage, Neil channels Puck's resistance, showing the world and himself the fact that he can live deliberately, even if it is just through a performance.

However, unlike Thoreau's words, Neil does not have the chance to escape the authority figures in his life; he builds up the courage to disobey his father by auditioning for the school play, despite receiving heavy opposition to his passion for acting. The contrast between Neil's desires and his parents' expectations makes it hard for him to handle, and eventually, it leads to his suicide, demonstrating the idea that nonconformity does not always lead to a positive outcome.

While Thoreau voluntarily isolated himself from the expectations of society by leaving his former life behind, Neil's act of disobeying his father by following the philosophy of "carpe diem" remains short-lived and provocative. Neil's suicide in this intersection suggests that literature and particularly Thoreau's passage from "Walden" creates a conflict between following one's dreams and self-destruction.

Todd Anderson adopts Thoreau's ideas under John Keating's guidance, but in a slower, more sustainable manner. He is afraid of self-reflection and expression, which contradicts the very idea that Thoreau's passage stands against. Todd and Neil's friendship functions as a symbol for the conflicting natures of carpe diem.

Neil Perry takes him under his wing and tries to encourage Todd to be more courageous and confident, silently affirming his own desire to be guided and supported through his own journey of nonconforming to his own parents. From Neil's perspective, helping Todd achieve confidence is not only an act of friendship but also a way of helping himself, as he

acknowledges the same feelings of oppression in Todd that he faces under his father's control. In return, Todd subtly accepts Neil's protectiveness, since he has never encountered a friend who genuinely acknowledged and cared for his emotions before. Following Neil's death, he becomes the one to actively rebel against the authority by standing on his desk after Keating gets fired for causing Neil's suicide. However, this act remains only a way to pay tribute to Keating, who helped him discover his individuality. The novel argues that once again, Thoreau's philosophy is insufficient against systematic authority, and Keating is an influence on their lives as solely a personal awakening and not a force sufficient enough to dismantle conformist power.

Charlie Dalton is another member of the Dead Poets Society and a student in Keating's English class. Charlie is the most flamboyant and rebellious amongst the other members, and his individualist awakening is loud and dramatic. Throughout the novel, it is seen that he thrives on risk and challenge; he is frequently the first to initiate bold plans, often pushing others towards rebellious acts. He follows Thoreau's doctrines in his own unapologetic lens, such as publishing an article about admitting female students to Welton Academy. The quote from Thoreau "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." (Kleinbaum, 1989, p.53) correlates to Charlie's experiences as he is an individual who wants to extract and reach every ounce of freedom from his youth. He creates the alter ego "Nuwanda" as a symbol of his desire to be free from the principal's conformist approaches. Thoreau also emphasizes "he does not wish to practice resignation unless it was necessary." Similarly, Charlie refuses to conform to authority, even when he gets confronted by the principal about his malpractices, he maintains his stance of not surrendering his individuality.

Nonetheless, it is implied that ultimately, the novel reinforces the authority it aims to criticise. Keating's dismissal from teaching at Welton Academy suggests that the traditional American educational structure of the 1950s overpowered individualistic expression. In addition, Neil's suicide is interpreted as evidence for the unsustainability of the novel's empowerment of nonconforming to society, leading to a shift which argues that the novel criticises the effect of radical individualism in a conformity induced environment as the ultimate surrender to imposed authority.

The meetings of the Dead Poets Society take place in an old Indian cave near Welton Academy, a place that symbolizes freedom to the members. Within this safe and hidden cave, students form a tight-knit community where they can express themselves without the weight of conformity and pressure. All of the members are united by their passion to challenge conformity as they struggle with it. Neil disobeys the authority of his father, Todd gains self-confidence, Charlie protests against the school's rules, and Knox does not accept social norms in his desire for love. So, the cave is a safe place for the boys to be themselves, which is different from the strict rules at Welton Academy, the principal, and their parents. Although the cave is a metaphor for freedom from society's constraints, it stays hidden and contemporary in their act of rebellion. The boys protest privately while a shift from conformist authority to embracing individualism requires deeper changes.

5. CONCLUSION

This essay's purpose was to answer the research question of "To what extent does the novel "Dead Poets Society" criticise the traditional education system in the United States by highlighting the conflict between individuality and conformity within the context of a conservative American school setting?" The examination of the period 1959 allowed for the inference that the historical and political context of the time had shaped the portrayal and critique of conformism in the novel, providing Keating's teaching style and the traditional way as a dilemma rooted in the Red Scare and McCarthyism. The novel centres on one criticism; the way the traditional American education system, shaped by the remnants of the ideological battles of the 1950s, depicts conformism as something that can both be overcome internally and something that is unchangeable. Despite these outcomes, "Carpe diem" illustrates that the value of life is found through authenticity and individuality.

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