

The Atlantic

***Dead Poets Society* Is a Terrible Defense of the Humanities**

The beloved film's portrayal of studying literature is both misleading and deeply seductive.



Touchstone Pictures

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I've never hated a film quite the way I hate *Dead Poets Society*. I expect that them's fighting words, at least in some quarters; at least I hope they are. Because I'm trying to pick a fight here.

I was in the last year of my English literature PhD program in the summer of

1989, when *Dead Poets Society* was released. My younger brother Scott, who really didn't have the money to spare, slipped my wife Robyn and me a ten-dollar bill (these were simpler times) and told us he'd watch our kids so we could go out to see it. No one in my family quite understood what I wanted to do for a living or, having finished my bachelor's degree, why I'd spend seven *more* years in school to do it; but having seen *Dead Poets Society*, Scott believed he finally had an idea of what I wanted to do with my life, and more importantly, why.

We went to the movie and watched, often swept up in the autumnal New England beauty of Welton Academy (the real-life St. Andrew's School, Middletown, Delaware). But I walked out horrified that anyone would think that what happens in Mr. Keating's classroom—or outside of it, because so many of his poetry-derived “life lessons” are taught outside the classroom, after all—had anything to do with literary study, or why I was pursuing a graduate degree in English. I think I hate *Dead Poets Society* for the same reason that Robyn, a physician assistant, hates *House*: because its portrayal of my profession is both misleading and deeply seductive. For what Keating (Robin Williams) models for his students isn't literary criticism, or analysis, or even study. In fact, it's not even good, careful reading. Rather, it's the literary equivalent of fandom. Worse, it's anti-intellectual. It takes Emily Dickinson's playful remark to her mentor Thomas Higginson, “If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry,” and turns it into a critical principle. It's not.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm all for passion in the literature classroom. Harvard poetry professor Helen Vendler uses two lines from Wordsworth's *The Prelude* as the title for an essay about teaching: “What we have loved, / Others will love....” That second line concludes, “and we will teach them how.” That's how I teach, or hope to teach: with my heart on my sleeve, perhaps, but with my brain always fully engaged. I'm fortunate to do what I

love for a living, and I know it. That's how I was taught, in high school especially. I'm an English professor today because I had Mr. Hansen in ninth grade, and Mr. Jackson in eleventh.

But passion alone, divorced from the thrilling intellectual work of real analysis, is empty, even dangerous. When we simply "feel" a poem, carried away by the sound of words, rather than actually *reading* it, we're rather likely to get it wrong. We see Mr. Keating, in fact, making just this kind of mistake during one of his stirring orations to the boys of Welton. In a hackneyed speech about resisting conformity that he seems to have delivered many times before, Keating invokes that oft-invoked but rarely understood chestnut, "The Road Not Taken": "Robert Frost said, 'Two roads diverged in a wood and I / I took the one less traveled by / And that has made all the difference.'"

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Wha—? Has Keating actually read the poem from which he so blithely samples? For Robert Frost said no such thing: a character in his poem says it. And we're meant to learn, over the course of that poem, that he's wrong—that he's both congratulating and kidding himself. He chooses his road ostensibly because "it was grassy and wanted wear"; but this description is contradicted in the very next lines—"Though as for that, the passing there / Had worn them really about the same," and—more incredibly still—"both that morning equally lay / In leaves no step had trodden black." He wants to claim to have taken the exceptional road, if not the spiritual high road; but he knows on some level that it's a hollow boast.

Keating hasn't actually read "The Road Not Taken" in any meaningful sense;

rather, he's adopted it, adapted it, made it his own—made it say what he wants it to say. His use of those closing lines, wrenched from their context, isn't just wrong—it's *completely* wrong, and Keating uses them to point a moral entirely different from that of Frost's poem. (In a like manner, how often has Frost's "The Mending Wall" been quoted out of context in debates about immigration reform? "Good fences make good neighbors," indeed.)

The film's anti-intellectualism is both quite visceral and quite violent. When his students first sit down with their new poetry anthology, Keating tricks a student into reading aloud a few sentences from the banal introduction written by Dr. J. Evans Pritchard, PhD—a cartoonish version of academic criticism that opens with a split infinitive!—before instructing them to tear those pages out of their books. (Though generic-sounding, the essay's title, "Understanding Poetry," mischievously nods to the most influential poetry text of the 20th century, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's *Understanding Poetry* [1938].) Although he employs mock-heroic terms, Keating makes it clear that they're fighting for their spiritual lives:

This is a battle. A war. And the casualties could be your hearts and souls. Armies of academics going forward measuring poetry. No! We'll not have that here: no more Mr. J. Evans Pritchard. [Notice how he's just been stripped of his professional credential.] Now in my class you will learn to think for yourselves again. You will learn to savor words and language. No matter what anybody tells you, words and ideas can change the world.

Their textbook now purged of any taint of critical thought, the students are freed to enjoy an unmediated encounter with poetry in the raw.

This style of working with poetry—what’s sometimes termed poetry “appreciation,” as distinct from poetry criticism—is the m.o. of the Dead Poets Society, Welton’s bookish version of Yale’s Skull and Bones. Mr. Keating explains the purpose of the group to his inner circle of students in a conspiratorial whisper:

The Dead Poets were dedicated to sucking the marrow out of life. That’s a phrase from Thoreau we would invoke at the beginning of every meeting. A few would gather at the old Indian cave and read from Thoreau, Whitman, Shelley, the biggies—even some of our own verse—and in the enchantment of the moment we’d let poetry work its magic.... We were Romantics. We didn’t just read poetry, we let it drip from our tongues like honey.

(“We would *invoke*”? “Our own *verse*”? Who’s writing this stuff?)

If the Welton School officials and parents suspect that Mr. Keating is leading his students astray, Pied Piper-like, there is at least something to that charge. Or rather, he’s sending them astray, without ever really leading them. The first meeting of the reconvened Society ends with one of the students reciting Vachel Lindsay’s notorious 1919 poem “The Congo,” a text whose racial politics are ambiguous at best; about it, W.E.B. DuBois wrote, “Mr. Lindsay knows little of the Negro, and that little is dangerous.” Whatever the poem’s real or intended politics, the spectacle of an all-white clique of prep-school boys capering out of a cave into the night while chanting the poem’s refrain (“THEN I SAW THE CONGO, CREEPING THROUGH THE BLACK, / CUTTING THROUGH THE JUNGLE WITH A GOLDEN TRACK”)—well, *shudder*. Shades of “What Makes the Red Man Red?,” from Disney’s *Peter Pan*. The setting, after all, is the “old Indian cave.”

For all his talk about students “finding their own voice,” however, Keating actually allows his students very little opportunity for original thought. It’s a freedom that’s often preached but never realized. A graphic example is presented in one of the film’s iconic moments, when that zany Mr. Keating with his “unorthodox” teaching methods suddenly leaps up onto his desk. Why? “I stand on my desk to remind myself that we must constantly look at things in a different way,” he helpfully declaims. How bold: He’s standing perhaps 2½ feet off the ground. Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his essay “Nature,” had made the same point rather more radically, suggesting that one “Turn the eyes upside down, by looking at the landscape through your legs.”

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Keating then has the boys march up to the front, of course, and one-by-one and two-by-two they mount his desk and they too “look at things in a different way”—exactly the different way that he has. After each has experienced this “small alteration in [his] local position” (Emerson), he steps or leaps off the desk, as if a lemming off a cliff: Keating’s warning, “Don’t just walk off the edge like lemmings!,” unfortunately only serves to underscore the horrible irony of this unintended dramatic metaphor. Even when the students reprise this desktop posture at the film’s close, in a gesture of schoolboy disobedience (or perhaps obedience to Keating), we realize that while the boys are marching to the beat of a different drum, it’s Keating’s drum. Or they’re dancing to his pipes.

One of the strangest things about watching the film again, 25 years on—for while I’ve long loathed it, until now I’d never actually revisited it—is that I

now find myself sympathizing not primarily with the plucky and irreverent John Keating, but to a surprising degree with his “old fart” colleagues whom I’m clearly supposed to find benighted. (It’s also a revelation to watch a young Ethan Hawke, before he could really act—and a young Robert Sean Leonard [Dr. Wilson on *House*], before he couldn’t.) Smarmy to the end, Keating, when interrogated about his teaching antics by the school’s headmaster, quips, “I always thought the idea of education was to learn to think for yourself.” The film gives us no evidence that he’s done this for Neil, Todd, Knox, and Charlie. And while too cynical by half, the headmaster’s response is one with which I sympathize a good deal more now than I did back then: “At these boys’ age? Not on your life. Tradition, John. Discipline. Prepare them for college and the rest will take care of itself.” On some level, Keating is a Lost Boy who refuses to grow up. It’s hard to forget, in this connection, that Williams went on to play Peter Banning/Peter Pan two years later in Steven Spielberg’s parental guilt-fueled remake of that story, *Hook*.

Why does all of this matter? In part, because *Dead Poets Society* might well be the most enduring and beloved picture ever made about teaching the humanities. While many English professors dislike and distrust the film, there’s another large contingent, even among those who teach literature in high school and college, that loves it. And I’m not deaf to its charms. Compared to his colleagues, Mr. Keating is a thrilling teacher, a breath of fresh air, and rightly beloved. The rote repetition and memorization taking place in adjoining classrooms makes his teaching seem quite vibrant.

But while avoiding the pitfalls of dull pedagogy, Keating doesn’t finally give his students anything in its place besides a kind of vague enthusiasm. Next door, Mr. McAllister’s students are declining Latin—*Agricolam*, *Agricola*, *Agricolae*, *Agricolarum*, *Agricolis*, *Agricolas*, *Agrilcolis*; out in the hallway, in front of the trophy case and faded photographs of old Weltonians, Keating

preaches it. “Carpe diem,” he entreats, during their first class period together.

With its 25th anniversary nearly upon us, the enduring popularity of *Dead Poets Society*—voted the greatest “school film” ever made, and often named by viewers as one of the most inspirational films of all time, according to a 2011 piece in *The Guardian*—has a great deal, I believe, to tell us about the current conversation concerning the “crisis in the humanities.”

Certainly it has been an interesting few years for humanists. Since the economic downturn of 2008, enrollments in humanities courses across the country have declined; at the same time—the flip-side of the coin—colleges and universities are seeing a sharp increase in students majoring in those disciplines which, rightly or wrongly, are thought to ensure better employment prospects at the conclusion of one’s studies. This titanic (if cartoonish) battle, often characterized as STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) v. humanities—Big Science, little man—has been splashed across the higher education and broader popular press, and has clearly captured the public imagination. The headlines in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* suggest the contours of the “crisis”: “[The Humanities’ Value](#)” (“Why should society support the humanities when so many people are suffering from the effects of the economic crisis?”); “[In the Humanities, How Should We Define ‘Decline’?](#)” (“Colleagues nationwide were stunned to learn a few weeks ago that a French department and four other humanities departments at SUNY-Albany were being sacrificed for their ‘underperformance’”); and even “[It’s Time to Stop Mourning the Humanities](#)” (“As we are forced to sell out to corporate models of higher education, let’s at least be sure to sell high”).

In the conversation about the fate of the humanities, these disciplines are often caricatured to the point of being unrecognizable to those of us in the

component fields. The most alarming version—one, I’m arguing, that has been propagated by *Dead Poets Society*—is what I’ve taken to calling “sentimental humanities”: humanities content stripped of all humanities methodology and rigor. This is a feel-good humanities—the humanities of uplift. The film is of no help as we try to find our way out of our current standoff—and to the degree that it unconsciously stands in for humanities pedagogy and scholarship, it does real damage. I believe, in particular, that there are two fundamental problems with allowing this *Dead Poets Society*, sentimentalized version of the humanities to serve as our model for what it means to be deeply and passionately engaged in the study of music, art, language and literature, history, philosophy, religion—of human culture. Call them resistance and acceptance.

Though few will say so publicly, there are those with a stake in the debate that resist granting a greater role in contemporary higher-ed curricula to the humanities. When they resist, it’s often the sentimental humanities that they’re resisting: the conception that the humanities, as a group of disciplines, is more about feeling than thinking. That the humanities is easy, a soft option; that the humanities doesn’t train thinkers. Or more often, and more explicitly, that the humanities don’t train employees. North Carolina governor Pat McCrory [made headlines](#) last year by telling the state’s high-school seniors, “If you want to take gender studies that’s fine. Go to a private school, and take it. But I don’t want to subsidize that if that’s not going to get someone a job.” Even our president, with a social science degree (political science) and two years at a liberal arts college (Occidental), has repeatedly trumpeted the importance of technical education and vocational training. Though [he’s since apologized](#), humanists across the country groaned when Obama quipped, at a General Electric plant in Wisconsin on January 30, that “folks can make a lot more, potentially, with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art-history degree.”

For poetry, in the public imaginary, is the realm of feeling rather than thinking.

Oh: and that it's the refuge of narcissists. No matter the text that he's ostensibly engaged with, Mr. Keating, like Hamlet in Stéphane Mallarmé's wonderful description, is forever "reading in the book of himself." This is what Keating's namesake John Keats (referencing Wordsworth) called the "egotistical sublime." Recently, some [pioneering work in neuroscience](#) has begun to suggest what English teachers have long known: that the power of literature is the power of alterity, creating the possibility of encountering the other in a form not easily recuperable, not easily assimilable to the self. "Imaginative sympathy," we used to call it. To read literature well is to be challenged, and to emerge changed.

But for Keating, it's the text (like Frost's poem) that is changed, not the reader. He does the same thing to the Whitman poem "O Me! O Life!" that he recites to his students. Used as the voiceover for [a recent iPad ad](#), Mr. Keating's pep talk quotes the opening and closing lines of the poem, silently eliding the middle: "Oh me! Oh life! / of the questions of these recurring, / Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill'd with the foolish, /.../ What good amid these, O me, O life? // *Answer.* // That you are here—that life exists and identity, / That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse." He's quoting *from* Whitman, he says, but the first line he omits is telling: "Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more faithless?)." Go back and add that line to the quotation and see how it alters the whole. For Keating—and one fears, examining the scant evidence the film provides, for his students—every poem is a Song of Myself. This, then, is what's at stake in Keating's misreadings—I'm not interested simply in catching a fictional teacher out in an error. But he misreads both

Frost and Whitman in such a way that he avoids precisely that encounter with the other, finding in poetry only an echo of what he already knows—what he's oft thought, but ne'er so well expressed.

And when advocates for the STEM fields do make room at the table for the humanities, it's too frequently this toothless, much diminished variety they have in mind. Keating says, "We don't read and write poetry because it's cute." But I fear that too often, when we do find a place for the humanities in the curriculum, we do so precisely because they are. Cute. Because they make us feel all warm and fuzzy.

The last time our country experienced a "crisis in the humanities," it coincided precisely with the rise of (largely Continental) literary theory in U.S. English and comparative literature departments in the 1970s and early '80s. David Richter cleverly calls his classroom anthology of these theoretical readings *Falling into Theory*, for there's a fully developed narrative of Edenic purity and postlapsarian cynicism that lies just beneath the surface of the public backlash against the ascendancy of literary theory.

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So if, by one logic, the humanities is dismissed as too lightweight, in another they're banished unless they bear themselves modestly, "come / on little cat feet." The humanities fell from grace, then, as an unfortunate consequence of its politicization and turn to theory. In this narrative, the "crisis" in the humanities is wholly of its own making: It's our own damn fault.

In the humanities, unlike the other branches of higher learning, any amount of analysis is liable to be dismissed as "paralysis by analysis" (in the way

Keating dismisses Dr. J. Evans Pritchard's critical method as "measuring poetry"). Those making such a charge might invoke these lines from Wordsworth's "The Tables Turned": "Our meddling intellect / Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:— / We murder to dissect." These lines (especially the last) are much more familiar than the poem from which they're taken. But I've pulled a Keating on you: I've taken them out of context, for the first line of the quatrain is, "Sweet is the lore which Nature brings." Wordsworth suggests that we murder not literature, but nature, with our "meddling intellects" (in order, paradoxically, to create literature in the first place). If Wordsworth and the Romantics sometimes argue for an anti-intellectual (or merely non-intellectual) relationship to nature, they never offer this as a theory of reading, as Keating consistently does.

But many people like misreading "The Tables Turned," and like their poetry, as the *Car Talk* guys would say, "unencumbered by the thought process." There's a reason there's no Dead Novelists Society: for poetry, in the public imaginary, is the realm of feeling rather than thinking, and the very epitome of humanistic study. To understand how preposterous and offensive this stipulation is, turn it around. Imagine what would happen if we suddenly insisted that physics professors were ruining the beauty and mystery and wonder of the natural world by forcing students memorize equations. Or if we demanded that the politics department stop teaching courses in political theory.

The resistance to the humanities: In one of its guises, that of *Dead Poets Society*, it finally comes down to a preference for fans over critics, amateurs over professionals. Everyone engaged in the debates swirling around the humanities, it seems, is willing to let humanists pursue their interests as amateurs, letting "poetry work its magic ... in the enchantment of the moment." Some of those who wish us well—so long as it doesn't cost them anything, in terms of faculty lines, or course enrollments, or research

funding—enjoy a fan’s relationship to the humanities themselves, and at best hope for the same for their students.

Scholars and teachers of the humanities, however: We will insist on being welcomed to the table as professionals.

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