



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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O Robin! My Captain!

Your children have been out of school and underfoot for less than a month and already you are counting the days—minutes, you say?—until school regathers them to its bosom in blessed September. For now, enroll them for two hours in Welton Academy. You, too, might as well matriculate for the pleasure of studying poetry with John Keating.

Keating, played with restrained perfection by Robin Williams (there is no "Goooooooooooood Morning Vermont!"), is the intense but deft English teacher whose spirit drives "Dead Poets Society." This movie may wean a few adolescents away from addiction to the merely visual. It can spark appreciation of the raptures—that is not too strong a word—they can receive from words.

The title itself speaks well of the movie's makers. Notice, no roman numeral. In this summer of sequels (coming soon, "Ghostbusters Go Star Trekking Through a Nightmare on Elm Street with Indiana Jones, Part XIV") this is an original idea. The title is quirky and probably off-putting to the lowing bovine herd of people who are put off by anything odd. Poets? Today, slam-bang mindless action seems required to arrest the attention of the jaded public with its flickering five-second attention span. This movie promises only—only!—the pleasure of words.

A prep-school teacher as hero? Keating is heroic, but not in the banal manner of the whip-cracking, death-defying archaeologist Jones. Keating's heroism is in his discipline, the purity of his devotion to his vocation. It is, for him, literally a *vocatio*, a calling. Language spoken by dead poets calls him. He will summon from some sons of the upper class a sense of the wonderful wildness of life.

Wildness is severely suppressed at staid Welton in rural Vermont in 1959. But Keating enkindles seven students who revive a secret society, the Dead Poets. It meets after midnight, against school rules, in a cave, where poetry is read after an invocation by Thoreau: "I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life." When they prance through the forest fog toward the cave they resemble druids in duffel coats. Youth usually has its private language. The seven boys

experience from poetry a bonding and delight that today's youth derive from rock music and the pathetic verbal slouching of rap.

Robin Williams's favorite poet is e.e. cummings. That figures. Or: t(Ha)t fi!Gu s. cummings, whose exuber-

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ance was too protean for orthodox typography, said the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls are unbeautiful and have comfortable minds.

Williams's Keating begins refurbishing his pupils' souls by telling them they are mortal, "food for worms, lads!...*Carpe Diem*, lads." The boys declaim lines from Whitman while kicking soccer balls. Keating's credo is Whitman's, "...the powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse."

A powerful teacher like Keating may at times teeter on the brink of intellectual bullying, making individuality mandatory. However, Williams rightly describes Keating as a "catalyst" for the boys, and Keating periodically recedes from the story. This is the movie's point. Keating is always there because a good teacher is a benevolent contagion, an infectious spirit, an emulable stance toward life. That is why it is said good teachers enjoy a kind of immortality: their influence never stops radiating.

The school (actually, St. Andrew's in Delaware) has an N. C. Wyeth mural. On one side, boys surround a figure of Liberty; on the other, industrialists surround a drafting table. The mural serenely suggests the easy compatibility of liberty and practicality, the free man as pragmatist. The movie sees a shadow over life, a tension between the poetic and practical impulses. Both are natural and dignified. What is perennially problematic is accommodating individuality and social ambition.

Adolescent awakening: The story is set on the eve of the 1960s, so it may seem quaint that Keating must toil to overcome student passivity. Actually, few '60s students fit the '60s stereotypes. Furthermore, this story of adolescent awakening is both of the late '50s time, and timeless. Although the 1950s are called years of 'conformity,' the principal conformity was that of the chorus decrying it. The characterization of the Eisenhower years as "the bland leading the bland" does no justice to the intellectual ferment and literary vigor.



David Riesman's "The Lonely Crowd" (1950), C. Wright Mills's "White Collar" (1951), Sloan Wilson's "The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit" (1955) and William Whyte's "The Organization Man" (1956) anticipated a 1960s anxiety, the suffocation of individuality by social structures and pressures. In "Dead Poets Society" these pressures are incarnate in a thin-lipped father practicing parental fascism and hounding his son to Hell and Harvard Medical School.

There was in the '50s an unhealthy concern with producing "well-adjusted" (to what?) adolescents so "well-rounded" they had no edges. Keating is an admirable sort of '50s figure, an intellectual eager to carve edges or prevent them from being abraded by the rasp of a dull school. However, he is not a harbinger of the 1960s, not a politicized academic. His politics (and, for all I know, Robin Williams's) may be part Nietzsche, part Pogo. The power of his personality is in the purity of his conviction that literature, the high mountain pass leading to passionate understanding, is so large and absorbing it leaves no time for lesser, supposedly more "relevant" (to what?) matters.

Hollywood has an almost unconquerable itch for moral black and white, and this movie has a two-hanky ending that manipulates emotions too mechanically. But at the core of the movie is a flinty, unsentimental message: the wildness of life can be dangerously wild. Creativity can have painful costs that must be paid in the coin of personal, family, and social stresses.

Speaking of stress, while waiting for September do note that Keating tells the boys they may address him either as Mr. Keating or O Captain! my Captain! (from Whitman's poem about Lincoln's death). This summer, answer your children only when so addressed. It will work wonders for your morale, the tone of your household, and the caliber of the long days until Labor Day.

George F. Will, *Columnist*

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