**Character Map**

- **Mr John Keating**
  - An idealistic English Literature teacher who returns to his alma mater to instruct a new generation of boys and to attempt to impart both his love of poetry and his philosophy of making the most of life, summed up as ‘carpe diem’

- **Mr Perry**
  - Authoritative, strict, manipulative, pushes his son to succeed

- **Mrs Perry**
  - Submissive and meek, unwilling to stand up to her husband

- **Mr Nolan**
  - Headmaster, traditional and rigid, eventually uses Mr Keating as a scapegoat

- **Todd Anderson**
  - Shy and nervous student, absorbs Mr Keating’s teachings and asserts himself in the final scene

- **Neil Perry**
  - Bright boy who embraces Mr Keating’s teachings, longs to act but is forbidden, commits suicide

- **Mr McAllister**
  - Traditional but kind, a teacher who learns from Mr Keating

- **Mr John Keating**
  - Teacher/Student

- **Richard Cameron**
  - Sycophantic student, part of the Dead Poets Society, betrays Mr Keating

- **Charles ‘Nuwanda’ Dalton**
  - Charming rebel of the group, seeks attention, eventually expelled

- **Stevie Meeks**
  - Member of the Dead Poets Society, gifted student, well-liked

- **Gerard Pitts**
  - Member of the Dead Poets Society, slightly clumsy and awkward

- **Chet Danbury**
  - Local boy, football player and bully, boyfriend of Chris Noel

- **Knox Overstreet**
  - Bright and popular student, woos Chris using the ideals of the Dead Poets Society

- **Chris Noel**
  - Local girl, eventually reciprocates Knox’s romantic interest
OVERVIEW

About the director

Peter Weir is an Australian director. He has been a significant influence on filmmaking in his native country and his Australian films include *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *The Last Wave* and *Gallipoli*. He began his career in television comedy, working on *The Mavis Bramston Show*, before moving on to documentary work with the government-financed organisation Film Australia.

After enjoying significant success in Australia, Weir went on to direct many critically acclaimed international films, including *The Truman Show*, *Master and Commander* and *Witness* — for which he was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Director. He is also a screenwriter and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay for the romantic comedy *Green Card* (1990). He also wrote and directed *The Way Back*, a drama set during World War II. Other credits as a director include *The Cars That Ate Paris* and *The Year of Living Dangerously*.

Weir was made a Member of the Order of Australia for his contribution to the arts.

About the screenwriter

Tom Schulman, an American screenwriter, wrote the original screenplay for *Dead Poets Society*, for which he received an Academy Award. Apart from this (his most successful film), Schulman is mainly known for family-friendly films such as *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* and *What About Bob?*

Synopsis

Set at a fictional boarding school in America in 1959, *Dead Poets Society* tells the story of the arrival of a new, innovative teacher, John Keating, and the effect his personality and teaching methods have on his students. Welton Academy is a prestigious school and its students are expected to attain high grades and graduate into fields such as medicine, finance and law. Self-expression is discouraged, being seen as frivolous, and discipline
is strict. Mr Keating encourages students to think for themselves, which has both positive and negative consequences. The two main characters, Neil and Todd, are outwardly very different but inwardly both are passionate and artistic young men. They deal with their desires very differently and, when a death occurs, the teachers, parents and students are left with the difficult task of assigning responsibility.

Character summaries

Mr John Keating
John Keating (played by Robin Williams) is a teacher of English Literature, who has just returned to his boyhood school as a member of staff. His approach to teaching is modern, interactive and intuitive, despite working in a school where traditional, structured and objective methods are considered superior – indeed, the only acceptable methods.

Little is revealed about Mr Keating’s personal background, apart from a brief mention (s.9) of a woman (presumably his girlfriend or wife) who is still in England, where he had previously taught. Indeed, his character seems to exist solely in relation to his function as an inspiration to the boys in his class.

John Keating’s name is almost certainly a reference to the British poet John Keats, who wrote some of the most famous and emotionally sophisticated poetry of the Romantic period, including such classics as ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ and ‘Ode to a Nightingale’. The Romantic period was characterised by a focus on individual feeling and emotional experience. Keats died young (at 26 years old), and is often cited as an artist whose life was tragically cut short, which creates a parallel with the death of Neil in Dead Poets Society.

Neil Perry
Neil Perry (played by Robert Sean Leonard) is the son of a middle-class couple who have made significant sacrifices to send their son to Welton Academy. In this sense, he is very different from the privileged boys who attend the school and is under pressure to create a good return on his parents’ investment. His father is extremely strict, his mother meek and submissive. While obedient, Neil is also passionate and energetic, and
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discovers a keen interest in acting during the school year that the film covers, which motivates him to defy his father for the first time. His death by suicide is the climax of the film.

Todd Anderson
Played by Ethan Hawke, Todd is the younger son of a family who has already sent one child to Welton. He is in the shadow of his elder brother (who graduated as valedictorian) and while his parents appear genial, he is extremely meek and shy. His interior life is rich and active, however, and he is drawn to Mr Keating’s teachings even though he seems outwardly intimidated. Todd’s character arc is one of the most significant features of the film. Most notably, Todd is the first boy to stand on his desk in the final scene, uncharacteristically defying authority and drawing attention to himself, in order to communicate to Mr Keating the positive and transformative impact that his teaching has had.

Mr Perry
Neil’s father is played by Kurtwood Smith. A self-made man, Mr Perry is extremely strict, even given the historical context of 1959, the year in which the film is set. Depending on the viewer’s interpretation, he can be seen either as a manipulative and power-obsessed character who enjoys dominating his son, or a man who, while misguided, is driven by a desire to see his son happy, established and secure in life.

When Neil kills himself, after his father tells him he will be withdrawn from Welton and sent to military school, Mr Perry is genuinely distraught and cries out, ‘My son, my son!’ (s.9) while holding Neil’s body in his arms. However, he appears to be entirely unwilling to accept even the slightest portion of blame for Neil’s actions, and pursues punishment for Mr Keating the very next day, implying he places greater importance on vengeance than on mourning.

Knox Overstreet
Knox (played by Josh Charles) is from a wealthy background and is a well-adjusted and well-liked student at Welton. He is mildly sceptical about Mr Keating’s teachings until he meets Chris, a girl with whom he falls in love at first sight. He is the student who is most drawn to the aspects of Mr Keating’s ideas that deal with romantic love, and he embraces his
teacher's philosophy in a positive and appropriate way. He is among the boys who stand on their desks in the final scene.

**Charles (Charlie) Dalton**
Charlie (played by Gale Hansen) later adopts the name ‘Nuwanda’. He is a rebellious and charismatic Welton student, described as being from ‘a rich family’ (s.9), and is impetuous and charming, often teasing the other boys. Charlie is among the first to embrace Mr Keating’s teachings. He shows himself to be both loyal and rash when he punches Cameron for betraying their teacher. Despite his outward confidence, he seems to be unhappy at Welton, attempting to get himself expelled by perpetrating insolent stunts. He is kind to other boys in their times of need, showing that he is more than simply an attention-seeking rebel. He is expelled near the end of the film, after punching Cameron; his final fate is unknown.

**Steven Meeks**
‘Meeks’, as he is referred to by the other boys, is played by Allelon Ruggiero. He is the high-achieving academic in the Welton social group (his specialty is Latin, but he also works with Pitts on building a radio, implying well-rounded knowledge). He is good-natured and breaks the stereotype of the ‘smart nerd’ by joining the other boys in being quite adventurous. One of his lines is, ‘I’ll try anything once’ (s.3). He is among the boys who stand on their desks in the final scene.

**Richard Cameron**
Cameron, who is always referred to by his surname, is a conservative member of the boys’ social group. He is unwilling to break the rules unless under significant peer pressure. He blames Mr Keating for Neil’s death and sets in motion the events that lead to the teacher’s dismissal. Whether he believes Mr Keating is to blame or is simply desperate to protect himself is unclear. He is considered a traitor by the other boys, even those who eventually sign the document implicating Mr Keating.

In the original screenplay, Cameron was supposed to be one of the boys who, in the final scene, stand on their desks to honour Mr Keating; however, Dylan Kussman, the actor playing Cameron, read the scene and suggested that his character would not be willing to take the risk associated with this act. In the final version, Cameron stays in his seat,
with his face turned downwards, implying that, while he is ashamed of his cowardice, he remains steadfast in giving his own well-being priority over doing the right thing.

**Mr Nolan**

The headmaster (played by Norman Lloyd) is a traditional man. He refers to his love of teaching, and (not unlike Mr Perry) seems to feel that his strict discipline is in the best interest of the students. Following Neil’s death, he intimidates the boys into blaming John Keating, and then fires him. Mr Nolan’s main concern is the reputation of the school. His view is that boys need to be moulded with a strong hand and that exposing them to the kind of inflammatory and emotional rhetoric that Mr Keating employs will only make them unfocused and destructive. While corporal punishment was not uncommon at the time, Mr Nolan appears to take a particular satisfaction in beating Charlie, who has been insolent. This reinforces the interpretation that he sees boys as wild and untrustworthy, in need of boundaries – and sometimes brutal discipline – in order to become well-adjusted men.

**Gerard Pitts**

Pitts, as he is known, is a minor character (played by James Waterston) within the central group. He is affable, occasionally providing comic relief, either via jokes about his surname or through his physical awkwardness (he is the tallest and most gangly of the boys). Like the other boys (except for Charlie), he signs the document implicating Mr Keating, but he is also among those who stand on their desks in tribute to their teacher as he leaves the school.

**Chris Noel**

Chris (played by Alexandra Powers) is a local girl with whom Knox falls in love. She attends a co-educational public school, unlike the main characters. However, it is implied that she is also from a privileged background. Knox first meets her while having dinner with the Danburry family, friends of his parents. Chris is the girlfriend of the Danburrys’ son, Chet. Knox immediately falls in love with Chris and tries to woo her away from Chet.
BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Historical setting

*Dead Poets Society* is set at the fictional Welton Academy in Vermont, USA, in 1959. At that time, the economy was strong and education was highly valued. Despite widespread prosperity following the end of World War II, American society was also experiencing the anxiety of the Cold War with the Soviet Union and its satellite states. This veneer of prosperity undercut with tension is thematically reflected in *Dead Poets Society*.

It is important to note that Weir chose 1959, rather than earlier in the 1950s, as the historical setting for the film. By 1959, suggestions of social movements to come were beginning to appear in American culture (notably the civil rights and women’s rights movements). Weir has chosen to capture American society right at the turning point of a decade of social cohesion and conformity (the 1950s) and a decade of social upheaval and revolution (the 1960s). Much is at stake in maintaining the status quo at Welton, a microcosm of upper-class society, at a time when rumblings of change and upheaval would be threatening the perceived stability of such institutions. For instance, many private schools similar to Welton began accepting female students in the 1960s, and others began to integrate racially.

Significant class issues inform the narrative, too. Unlike more traditional societies (such as those of Britain or India), in the US social status and class can change significantly from one generation to another within a family, depending on individual success or failure. For this reason, the wealthy and/or upper-class parents of Welton students are extremely keen to see their sons succeed and maintain or improve their family’s social standing. For this to happen, it is necessary for the boys to be high achievers in school and enter the professional world, preferably (at the time) as lawyers or doctors. In a sense, each boy is not only working to succeed for himself, but also as a representative of his entire family. A student who performs poorly or flouts authority will shame his parents.