



RESEARCH PAPER

Demystification of Traditional Sacred: A Democratic Individual Perspective in Peter Weir's Film *Dead Poets Society*

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at analyzing the impacts of the stranglehold of traditional sacred in the education system as depicted in the selected film. For this analysis, Shlomo Wolbe's educational theory (2000) is followed. The education system, as described in *Dead Poets Society*, spoils the potential of the learners. The goal of self-actualization is neither set forth as a target aim nor achieved. The ripple generated by a new teacher who himself has been a product of the same subverted mode of education ends in his own dismissal from his job. One of the students who truly internalizes the pure sense of learning (contrary to traditional one) could not be accepted by society and hence commits suicide. This study takes Wolbe's model of democratization of the educational system as a theoretical framework. It was Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1985) that raised a dissenting voice and gave a postulate of democratic individualism instead of rote learning. Wolbe took it to further practical ground in the field of educational development.

KEYWORDS

Carpe Diem, Democratic Individualism, Demystification, Demythologization, Self-actualization, Traditional Sacred, *Dead Poets Society*

Introduction

The human body enters a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A 'political anatomy', which was also a 'mechanics of power', we being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus, discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, or 'docile' bodies. (Foucault, 1979, p.138)

In the film *Dead Poets Society* (1989), an academy by the name of Welton Academy is shown where a new academic term is taking its start. Mr. Nolan, who is presented as welcoming the students and their parents, addresses the assembly and gives a brief history of the academy. Then he declares it "the best preparatory school in the United States". Some old students are also present in the scene. Mr. Nolan asks the older ones to chant the four main points of the mission statement. All the boys, in response, chant in chorus, "Tradition, honor, discipline, excellence". After a while, Mr. Nolan introduces a new teacher, Mr. John Keating. After the retirement of an English teacher Mr. Portius, Mr. Keating would be teaching English. The unorthodox method of teaching of the new teacher, Mr. Keating, is deeply surprising for the entire class. As an alumnus of Welton Academy, Mr. Keating adopts a methodology quite contrary to traditional teaching. He is on a mission to make the lives of the students extraordinary, which he articulates at the very outset as he

encourages the students by saying, "make your lives extraordinary". To achieve that end, Mr. Keating has a principle which can be ascribed as his *modus operandi* as a teacher, and that is narrated in Latin as "carpe diem".

This principle signifies Mr. Keating's complete theory of life. The Latin expression *carpe diem* means "seize the day". Here is the point that Mr. Keating wants to inculcate in the minds of the students of Welton Academy. Capturing the opportunity offered at present paves the way towards making life extraordinary. Sticking to the tradition and leaving no room for innovation has been the fashion in vogue in Welton's system. Mr. Keating disregards the system in the capacity of an individual teacher. Instead of following the mistaken ambitions of the parents and the rules of the Academy, Mr. Keating encourages the students to identify their own potential to make life extraordinary. A student, Neil, who truly starts following his dreams, is admonished by his father. So much so that Neil is withdrawn from the Academy as a punishment for the crime of following his own desire to become an actor, which his father does not approve of. Thereupon, Neil is sent to a military institution. Heartbroken and left with no shelter to consult, Neil commits suicide. To determine the causes of the death of the student, an investigation is carried out at the academy. The allegation is levelled against Mr. Keating.

Consequently, he is dismissed from the job. Afterwards, an undertaking is signed by the students for strict compliance with the rules of the academy. Some students are reluctant, but because of the pressure from the parents, all are made to sign. Mr. Keating left, and several students showed their love and respect for the departing teacher. The Welton Academy could not allow any innovation of the sort that Mr. Keating is expected to bring about for the betterment of future generations.

This study aims at determining the sacred place given to tradition, even in the field, which must be meant for exploring new grounds. The young minds coming to an institution like Welton Academy have been disciplined in a way so that no such view could grow, which could challenge the traditional standpoint of the system, no matter how positive prospects that challenge could offer in the long run. Such a traditional sacred is detrimental to the potential of youth. Rather, its impacts are destructive. The mythologization of traditional sacred is so perfectly constructed in *Dead Poets Society* (1989) that the dissenting approach is so cruelly crushed that it pushes the very source (Mr. Keating) out of his job and a follower (Neil) to lose his life. This study is an endeavor to examine the demystification of the traditional sacred running in the educational system depicted in the film. "Demystification means to remove the mystery" (Mutisya, 1996, p.94). To expose the painful reality, the discursive status is questioned in this study. Any change in the system can only be expected in line with future needs and can be made possible even after such delving research.

Literature Review

Literature review summarizes and evaluates the texts of previous writings related to the exact theme by providing framework to think about the possible outcomes of current research. It may be clear overview of the used sources in organized form; and its function is to estimate and summarize the previous writing related to the theme of current research (Cheema et al., 2023; Jevan et al., 2023; Ahmad et al., 2024). Peter Weir's award-winning film *Dead Poets Society* (1989) received mixed responses from reviewers and critics. Some of them approved this film and considered it a success. According to a well-known American review-aggregator website, Rotten Tomatoes, the film holds an approval rating of 84% based on 61 reviews with an average score of 7.2/10. Howe (1989) called it "solid, smart

entertainment". In a detailed analysis, the roles played by different characters are admired, especially Robin Williams' role as John Keating.

Canby (1989) also praised Williams' "exceptionally fine performance" while writing that "*Dead Poets Society*. The role of John Keating, played by Robin Williams, is praised in the review of *The New York Times*. In a research paper published in the journal of Chapman University in 1998, the title "*Deconstructing Surveillance Pedagogy: Dead Poets Society*" is set to praise the role of Mr. Keating. According to the paper, the students accept Mr. Keating as their leader, and thus, they call him: "Oh captain, my captain". It is Keating's engaging personality, coupled with pedagogical philosophy and praxis, that make him a loveable and ideal teacher to the students. Another critic categorizes *Dead Poets Society* as a "profoundly regressive film" (McLaren and Leonardo, 1998). Here, the role of Mr. Keating, the new English teacher, is described as a free-thinking individual. He encourages students to express themselves creatively. Thus, he does not let the students remain in mythical moments of the past; rather, he empowers the students to follow their own dreams and desires on the basis of their potential.

Studying the application of power in organizational behavior has been discussed in a research article published in *Management Teaching Review* in 2022. In this article, Halbrook and Stoner (2022) maintain that the teaching process is adopted as a tool to inculcate the ideology of power. In another article titled, *Reason and/or Imagination? Peter Weir's Dead Poets Society*, the cinematic dramatization of the relationship between reason and imagination, is depicted in the film. In this article, the role of Mr. Keating is also highlighted by discussing the philosophy of life and his pedagogy for the better future of the youth in his class. Mr. Keating is portrayed in the article as a true mentor advising the pupils to make their lives remarkable by following their own imagined destination.

The existing body of research available is in abundance. A lot of research articles and reviews have been reviewed to get a nuanced understanding of the film. The review of the literature made so far cannot be claimed as exhaustive, yet it can be safely held that several studies analyzing the film from different perspectives have been approached. Some of them have been referred to above in this chapter. A major aspect of tradition and its mythologization as sacred has not been explored. Neither demythologization nor demystification came to any reviewer or critic. This is a significant gap that this study is intended to fill and thus contribute a valuable part to the existing body of research on this film.

Material and Methods

Theoretical Framework

The qualitative research method is used in this study as the data for analysis is qualitative in nature, method is adopted by the research of Maitelo et al (2023) used this method. John Rex's concept of demystification, as given in his work *Sociology and the Demystification of the Modern World* (2015), is followed in this study. Rex posits, "The demystification of the world might only be expected to expose its painful reality ..." (21). The concepts of demythologization and demystification of Musila Mutisa were also taken into consideration during this study. The strict stranglehold of the tradition and its negative effects on the cognitive capacity of young learners are analyzed. For the democratic individual perspective, Dewey's theory of Democracy and Education (1985) will be followed. Keeping the time constraints into consideration, this research is delimited to the cinematic depiction and written script of the film *Dead Poets Society* (1989).

Results and Discussion

John Dewey was amongst the earliest theorists of the twentieth century who supported the democratization of education. In his book *Democracy and Education* (1985), he postulates that the methodology of education should be designed so that it can provide ample opportunity for students to discover themselves and get the freedom to initiate change in the world. The individuals must observe for themselves, form their own theories, and personally test them. This is the only right alternative to the imposition of dogma as truth in the form of traditional sacred. The submission to traditional sacred reduces the mind to the act of acquiescing in truth and does not permit the discovery of new truths of nature. Austrian theorist Shlomo Wolbe (2000) takes the concept of Dewey even further to practical application on the ground. The question arises as to why such a high status is given to tradition. Those who hold power use this mystified version of tradition for their higher benefits. The mystification and mythologization of tradition take place over years and centuries. Besides, the cinematic presentation of such a mystified play of tradition elevates its status much more. Every antithesis is crushed so that no one could think of subverting the system in vogue. The demystification of such a traditional procedure is necessary for the development of ever-growing knowledge. In Peter Weir's film *Dead Poets Society* (1989), the education system of an academy is depicted as a place where tradition holds sway. The educational institute, Welton Academy, is declared the number one school by the owner, Mr. Nolan himself.

The very title of the film *Dead Poets Society* signifies that independent observation and pure creativity do not exist in this society. The poet is dead in the society depicted in the film. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the poet is "one (such as a creative artist) of great imaginative and expressive capabilities and special sensitivity to the medium" (Merriam-Webster 2003). According to the Collins English Dictionary, the poet is "a person who has the gift of poetic thought, imagination, and creation, together with the eloquence of expression" (2018). The faculties labelled as gifts are imagination, creation, and expression that a poet possesses. It means that all these faculties contribute to creating something new. Any Poets expression or other creation takes place once the environment outside is favorable. In case the situation outside is not convenient, such gifted faculties die without finding any expression. The tyrannical control in society depicted in the film *Dead Poets Society* (1989) leaves no space for any creative individual to work freely. The education system established in the line of tradition is strongly based on the utilitarian rationalization of power. The discourse of four pillars on which the education system of the *Dead Poets Society* (1989) is learnt by rote by all the students, and they immediately shouted in response when the bossing master, Mr. Nolan, asked. The four pillars are tradition, honor, discipline, and excellence. No passageway is left open for any other innovative thing to pass through this structure of education at Welton Academy. The present is restricted within the limits of the traditions of the past. Rather, the tradition is mythologized into a sacred, and no one is allowed to unfollow it.

The task of a mythologization of tradition as sacred is not accomplished at random. It has a specific purpose set by the power. After securing its place in society as a myth, the tradition controls all functions of any social set-up. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, "the principal function of a myth is to provide a justification for a ritual" (2016). This is the iron grip of the power any tyrannical set-up wields to uphold its discourse. This is how Welton Academy of *Dead Poets Society* (1989) declares itself justified in disciplining its students in the line of traditional sacred. The four pillars signify the methodology of submissiveness of every individual related to the Academy. Mr. Nolan makes students chant the names of the four pillars in the very first assembly in the presence of their parents. The students chant it as a ritual observed at the commencement of the academic term.

MR NOLAN

One hundred years ago, in 1859, 41 boys sat in this room and were asked the same question that greets you at the start of each semester. Gentlemen, what are the four pillars?

Throughout the pews, uniformed boys rise to their feet.

TODD, who is not wearing a uniform, is urged by his father to stand with them.

BOYS

Tradition, honor, discipline, excellence.

The boys quickly return to their seats.

This ritualistic activity is depicted as a soldiers' drill done on the command of a drill commander. The disciplined response bespeaks the totalitarian authority of the owner of Welton Academy. The pity is that parents force their children to comply with the commands strictly. The strict discipline imposed on the students and parents, who feel proud of it, has become part of the traditional sacred. This mythical status of this academy and the system operating it is quite justified. An alumnus of the same Welton Academy, Mr. Keating is introduced in the presence of the parents as a new English teacher.

Mr. Keating knows the system to the core, as he has been all through it. But in the very beginning, he calls it "Hell-ton Academy". Right from this point, the process of demystification starts. Having firsthand experience, Mr. Keating feels the burden of traditional sacred and ventures to unload it from the minds of his students. He endeavors to instill the true meaning of life into the minds of the young boys. He shows his strong desire that his students should identify their innate genius and develop it to make their mark in the world. In a scene where a boy, Pitts, is presented talking about three shades of life (past, present, and future), Keating comes up with a Latin proverb. Keating describes his entire worldview through this Latin proverb. He emphasizes living in the present, meaning that he wants to overthrow the tradition hitherto taken for granted as something sacred. This is demythologization and demystification of traditional sacred, which has been upheld as a holy mission. The entire edifice of disciplined drills upheld in the Welton Academy is shaken by the Latin phrase uttered by Keating. He who cannot capture the opportunity at hand and remains lost in the whirlwind of tradition gathers no solid results.

PITTS

"Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, old time is still a flying, and this same flower that smiles today, tomorrow will be dying."

KEATING

Thank you, Mr. Pitts. "Gather ye rosebuds
while ye may." The Latin term for that
sentiment is Carpe Diem. Now, who knows
what that means?

Meeks immediately puts his hand up.

MEEKS

Carpe Diem. That's "seize the day."

The Latin aphorism "Carpe Diem" taken from the Odes (23 BC) of Horace is usually translated as "seize the day". This imperative expression is a kind of direction given to the class by a new teacher in an institution where young minds are conditioned for conformist thinking. The system urges the students only to follow what is directed in the classes. It is the first time that Mr. Keating has dismantled the structure of Welton Academy. His narrative "seize the day" implies that the individual should keep pace with changing times. Time must not be left just to pass because, by so doing, it would depreciate the capabilities of the individuals with its passing. One should utilize the opportunity before one becomes a thing of the past. It is not altogether detachment from tradition. Rather, it is seizing the present for the sake of ever-growing new knowledge by keeping tradition as a background guide. This is the point Mr. Keating tries to indoctrinate in the minds of his students. The traditional sacred makes the coming generation only follow and trust in the sanctity of the past. The status of tradition is further consecrated by making a perfect myth out of it, which lends justification for ruling supreme. This is how the system of Welton Academy promotes rote learning without leaving any space for creativity to flourish. In the following passage, it can be noted how a teacher becomes a priest, assuming a divine power in the classroom where students are only supposed to follow without having any understanding.

INT. LATIN CLASSROOM - DAY

Mr. McAllister paces back and forth in front of the blackboard and gets
the students to repeat everything he says.

MCALLISTER

(students repeat after each word.)

Agricolam. Agricola. Agricolae.

Agricolarum. Agricolis. Agricolas.

Agricolis.

Again, please.

Agricola.

The above quote is sufficient evidence for the systematic flaw Welton Academy has in its educational setup. The students are directed to learn by heart through repetition drills. It is the sacredness of tradition that what has already been said has become part of traditions; the descendants are bound to follow what has been said by the preceding generations.

On the contrary, Mr. Keating has his own methodology for teaching and coaching young learners. For instance, he describes certain principles to analyze poetry. Then, the students themselves are encouraged to make a graphical representation of their analysis. He does not approve of any previous explanation when the text itself is available. That is why he makes students rip out the page of the introduction. He demystifies the sacralization of tradition.

KEATING

It's not the bible; you're not going to
go to hell for this. Go on, make a clean
tear; I want nothing left of it.

In the above quotation, the students are encouraged to be themselves and not followers of anything of the past. Mr. Keating empowers them by demythologizing the traditional sacred. Mr. Keating encourages boys to think of their keeping aside what the others say about anything. He urges them to break out of the traditional sacred.

KEATING

Just when you think you know something,
you have to look at it in another way.
Even though it may seem silly or wrong,
you must try! Now, when you read, don't
just consider what the author thinks.
Consider what you think.

KEATING

Boys, you must strive to find your own
voice. Because the longer you wait to
begin, the less likely you are to find
it at all. Thoreau said, "Most men lead
lives of quiet desperation." Don't be
resigned to that. Break out!

In his venture to put the learner on the right path to learning, Mr. Keating sacrifices his job. But on his departure from the campus, deep love and respect have been showered upon him by calling him, "O Captain, My Captain". The mistaken ambition on the part of the father of a boy, Neil, pushes the boy into depression and consequent suicide. Neil could not compromise with the ways of orthodoxy, even at the cost of his life. Careful handling is required to unearth a deep-rooted orthodox system so that no unfortunate incident takes place. Although Neil is not wrong in following his own dream, the volte-face is so abrupt that the father of the boy cannot adopt it. While demystifying any sanctified status, special care can be taken to streamline the hidden potential of the learner. Then it would all be balanced and beneficial for the betterment of young generations.

Conclusion

The Film *Dead Poets Society* (1989) describes two contrasting methods of teaching and learning. The traditional pedagogy where tradition is upheld as sacred. The students are directed to follow. No creative assignment is part of the curriculum as in the Welton Academy, an institute depicted in the film. The older traditional ways of life gain the status of sacred standards, which makes the coming generation submissive. However, in the educational system, this traditional sacred only results in the decline. The politics of the traditional sacred is never questioned. Rather, it becomes very hard to question the mythical status of that traditional sacred. It is this mythologization that justifies the authorities of any educational setup and makes learners follow. Such a system violates Dewey's (1985) concept of democratization of education. The system, as portrayed in the film, when judged against the yardstick propounded by Wolbe (2000), demystification becomes a matter of utmost requirement, as done by Mr. Keating in the plot of the film, to replace the traditional model. Democracy in the educational system is possible only when demystification is complete. It is the commodification of tradition coupled with the concept of sacred manipulated by power. It is a sort of indoctrination of the ideology to be subservient to the traditional sacred. When we take such doctrine into account, demystification becomes the only way to deconstruct the discourse of power and authority.

The film *Dead Poets Society* was a commercial success. The global receipts of the film were the fifth highest for the year 1989. The running time of the film is 128 minutes. The film was jointly produced by Touchstone Pictures and Silver Screen Partners. The music for the film was given by Maurice Jarre, a French film director and composer. Jarre is the same composer who provided music for *A Passage to India* (1984).

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