

## The Trauma of Conformity: Identity Struggless in *Dead Poets Society*

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### Article Info

#### Keywords:

Trauma,  
Conformity  
Identity Crisis,  
Dead Poets  
Society

### Abstract

This study examines psychological trauma caused by social conformity pressures experienced by Neil Perry in the film *Dead Poets Society* (1989). Using a qualitative film analysis approach grounded in Cathy Caruth's Trauma Theory, the research analyzes selected scenes and dialogues to explore how trauma emerges, repeats, and remains unprocessed within the character's identity formation. The data consist of purposively selected scenes and dialogues that depict parental authority, institutional discipline, and moments of self-assertion. The findings reveal that conformity pressures from family and educational institutions produce unresolved trauma manifested through silence, obedience, dissociation, and ultimately suicidal ideation. This study contributes to film trauma studies by demonstrating how Caruth's concept of belatedness and unclaimed experience explains adolescent identity crises in cinematic narratives.

**Kata kunci:**

Trauma,  
Konformitas,  
Krisis Identitas,  
*Dead Poets Society*

**Abstrak**

Penelitian ini mengkaji trauma psikologis yang disebabkan oleh tekanan konformitas sosial yang dialami oleh Neil Perry dalam film *Dead Poets Society* (1989). Dengan menggunakan pendekatan analisis film kualitatif yang berlandaskan Teori Trauma Cathy Caruth, penelitian ini menganalisis adegan dan dialog terpilih untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana trauma muncul, berulang, dan tetap tidak terolah dalam proses pembentukan identitas tokoh. Data penelitian terdiri atas adegan dan dialog yang dipilih secara purposif yang merepresentasikan otoritas orang tua, disiplin institusional, serta momen-momen penegasan diri. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa tekanan konformitas yang berasal dari keluarga dan institusi pendidikan menghasilkan trauma yang tidak terselesaikan, yang termanifestasi dalam bentuk keheningan, kepatuhan, disosiasi, dan pada akhirnya ideasi bunuh diri. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada kajian trauma dalam film dengan menunjukkan bagaimana konsep *belatedness* dan *unclaimed experience* dari Caruth mampu menjelaskan krisis identitas remaja dalam narasi sinematik.

**ملخص**

الكلمات الرئيسية:  
الصدمة،  
الامتثال الاجتماعي،  
أزمة الهوية،  
*Dead Poets Society*.

تتناول هذه الدراسة الصدمة النفسية الناتجة عن ضغوط الامتثال الاجتماعي التي يواجهها نيل بيرى في فيلم *Dead Poets Society*. وباستخدام منهج التحليل الفيدي النوعي المستند إلى نظرية الصدمة لكاثي كاروث، تقوم الدراسة بتحليل مشاهد وحوارات مختارة للكشف عن كيفية ظهور الصدمة وتكرارها وبقائها غير مُعالجة في عملية تشكّل هوية الشخصية. وتتكوّن بيانات البحث من مشاهد وحوارات تم اختيارها قصدياً، تمثل سلطة الوالدين، والانضباط المؤسسي، ولحظات تأكيد الذات. وتُظهر النتائج أن ضغوط الامتثال المفروضة من الأسرة والمؤسسات التعليمية تُنتج صدمة غير محلولة تتجلى في الصمت، والطاعة، والانفصال النفسي، وفي نهاية المطاف في التفكير الانتحاري. تسهم هذه الدراسة في دراسات الصدمة في السينما من خلال توضيح كيف يفسّر مفهوم «التأخر الزمني» (*belatedness*) «والتجربة غير المُعترف بها» (*unclaimed experience*) لدى كاروث أزمات الهوية لدى المراهقين في السرد السينمائي.

## INTRODUCTION

Trauma is an emotional response to a disastrous event, like an accident, natural disaster or abuse (Pathak et al., 2021). It describes an emotional reaction to a tragic event. According to the French psychodynamic school pioneered by Pierre Janet, psychological trauma has been defined as one or more events that, due to their characteristics, can alter the subject's psychic system, threatening to fragment mental cohesion (Perrotta, 2020). Shock and denial are the initial reactions to such a situation, but over time, a person may have erratic emotions, flashbacks, and physical symptoms including headaches, tremors, numbness, or nausea. Even the consequences could be so severe that they result in a dysfunctional pattern of relationships with other people. For a while, these emotions and symptoms are natural, but if they persist for an extended period of time, it negatively impacts a person's well-being (Husnia, 2024).

Several researchers have explored different theories of trauma and human experience, including Judith Herman and Cathy Caruth, a renowned expert in the field whose work has contributed significantly to the knowledge of the complexity of trauma narratives. Judith Herman views trauma as something other than ordinary misfortune. According to her, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or close personal encounters with violence and death. They confront humans with extremes of helplessness and terror, and evoke a catastrophic response. In the traditional trauma model pioneered by Cathy Caruth, trauma is viewed as an event that fragments consciousness and prevents direct linguistic representation (Caruth, 1996). Caruth also sees trauma not only as a personal wound, but also in relation to identity conflicts and narratives. By implying that the traumatic event permanently harms the psyche, the model highlights the intensity of suffering.

In correlation with trauma theory, this study intends to analyze an American drama film entitled "Dead Poets Society" (1989). This film vividly portrays the conflict between tradition and individualism, particularly within the context of education and personal fulfillment. It illustrates how the characters' exposure to various forms of psychological trauma, ranging from repressive educational environments and tyrannical parental expectations to the emotional devastation of loss and betrayal that directly contributes to their attempts at conformity and their subsequent crises of identity.

Dead Poets Society (1989), tells the story of Welton Academy in 1959, a prestigious, all-boys preparatory school steeped in "*Tradition, Honor, Discipline, Excellence*", and John Keating, an unconventional English teacher. He inspires his students to embrace individualism and "*carpe diem*". "*Carpe diem*" is a Latin phrase that translates to "seize the day." In the context of the film, it represents a philosophy of living in the present moment and making the most of opportunities, particularly by pursuing one's passions and desires without undue concern for future consequences or societal expectations. This encouragement for his students to "seize the day" is what fundamentally sets them on a collision course with the conservative values

of Welton Academy and the rigid expectations of their parents, ultimately leading to tragic consequences. While celebrated for its exploration of individuality, *Dead Poets Society* also profoundly demonstrates the insidious impact of trauma on its characters' struggles with conformity and their nascent identities.

The film will focus on one of the characters, Neil Perry, who experiences the trauma of conformity due to identity struggles. In the story, Neil Perry is depicted as a smart and rule-abiding honor student through his consistent academic excellence at Welton Academy, a prestigious preparatory school, and his initial willingness to follow his father's strict plans for his future, which include attending Harvard and becoming a doctor. He attends an elite school that upholds traditional values and conformity. In this pressurized environment, students are faced with academic demands, parental expectations, and limits to their freedom of self-expression. Neil Perry, as one of the main characters, symbolizes the conflict between personal desire and enormous external pressure. Neil has dreams of becoming an actor, but has to face harsh rejection from his father who has other future plans for him. These conditions created deep inner conflict within Neil, which eventually led to his tragic decision. In this context, Trauma Theory is a relevant approach to understanding the psychological impact of social pressure, conformity and loss of identity on individuals. The theory explains how disturbing and emotionally taxing experiences can lead to psychological wounds and identity crises that leave a lasting mark on an individual.

Previous research work on *Dead Poets Society* has often centered on its pedagogical implications, examining Keating's teaching methods or its critiques of traditional education and conformity (Mertens, 2024). Similarly, while Trauma Theory has been extensively applied to various literary and cinematic texts exploring the psychological impact of violence, loss, and systemic oppression (Caruth, 1996), its specific application to the subtle yet pervasive traumas experienced by the students in *Dead Poets Society* remains less explored in direct conjunction with their struggles for identity and conformity. Recent studies, however, have begun to touch on related aspects, such as the direct impact of the school environment on student mental health (Nagy, 2023) and the pressures that lead to conformity and inhibit self-expression (Mertens, 2024).

Moreover, to see how the dynamics of social and family pressures impact on individual psychology in the film *Dead Poets Society*, this research addresses the following questions: (1) How does social conformity pressure trigger psychological trauma in Neil Perry? (2) How is trauma represented through symptoms within the film's narrative? (3) How does the failure to process trauma contribute to Neil Perry's tragic decision?

## **METHOD**

This research employs a qualitative film analysis method using Cathy Caruth's Trauma Theory as the primary analytical framework. The Theory by Cathy Caruth focuses on trauma as a psychological injury that is not immediately realized or processed during the event, and then

haunts through memories, dreams, or behavior.

The data source of this research was taken from American coming-of-age drama film, "Dead Poets Society" (1989), directed by Peter Weir and written by Tom Schulman. The data consist of selected scenes and dialogues from Dead Poets Society (1989) that explicitly represent authority, repression, self-expression, and psychological breakdown. Scene selection followed three criteria: (1) scenes depicting institutional or parental authority, (2) scenes illustrating Neil Perry's emotional response or silence, and (3) scenes indicating repetition, belated realization, or acting-out behavior.

Data were analyzed through a trauma coding process: (a) repression and conformity pressure, (b) manifestation of trauma symptoms, and (c) acting-out or catastrophic repetition. Each scene was interpreted to identify trauma indicators such as dissociation, obedience, silence, and suicidal ideation.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Dead Poets Society (1989) was chosen for the research because it raised the issue of the crisis of the humanities. There are issues of conflict between identity struggles and social expectations. The issue of social expectations in this film is a description of social problems in literary works related to the current situation felt among the student-teenagers at Welton Academic. In this section, the writers will analyze some key scenes in the film Dead Poets Society and relate them to Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is an experience that "*cannot be fully processed when it occurs*," but will return in the form of psychological symptoms, disturbances of consciousness, or extreme actions (Caruth, 1996). In this film, the character Neil Perry experiences pressure that forms a psychological trauma that ultimately leads to a tragic end.

### Social Pressure and Conformity in the Academic Environment

Welton Academy's academic environment strongly upholds traditional values such as discipline and achievement. In Cathy Caruth's view, trauma is not only about physically experienced violent events, but also events that cannot be fully understood or absorbed by the individual at the time they occur. In this case, systemic pressure from schools is a form of symbolic violence that internalizes fears and expectations in students. Trauma arises when individuals, like Neil and Todd, feel a loss of control over their life choices due to external demands that silence their personal voice.



Figure 1: New school year ceremony 00:03:08

This scene shows how the school instills the absolute values of *tradition, honor, discipline, and excellence*. Transcends a mere demonstration of school values it vividly portrays the very genesis of psychological trauma for its young inhabitants, most acutely for Neil Perry. The uniform uniformity, the synchronized recitation, and the absence of any visible individual expression coalesce to create an intensely repressive atmosphere. Within Cathy Caruth's framework of trauma theory, this is not a singular, violent event but rather a continuous, insidious force that begins to chip away at the developing self. It constitutes an "unclaimed experience", which a profound psychological wound that, at the moment of its infliction, is not consciously registered or fully comprehended by the individual. The students, immersed in this pervasive culture of absolute conformity, are unable to process the constant pressure to suppress their burgeoning identities. Thus, the scene functions as a powerful visual exposition of how the subtle yet absolute imposition of external values can generate deep-seated trauma, leading to profound identity fragmentation and a desperate, often tragic, struggle for individual freedom. There is no room for students to express their individuality. The pressure from this system creates a repressive atmosphere that is the beginning of psychological trauma for students like Neil Perry.



Figure 2: Introduction of the words "Carpe diem" 00:16:18

Dialogue (Duration 00:15:44 to 00:16:31)

Mr: Keating : "But if you listen real close, you can hear them whisper their legacy to you."  
: "Go on, lean in. Listen. You hear it?"



: “*Carpe... Carpe diem... Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary.*”

Mr. Keating invites the students to read a poem in the trophy room, then introduces the principle of “*Carpe Diem - Seize the Day*”. This scene is the first moment where students, especially Neil, are exposed to the idea of living according to one's own desires, not the expectations of others. Mr. Keating's words such as “*make your lives extraordinary*” are in direct conflict with the traditional values taught by Welton (*tradition, honor, discipline, excellence*) that emphasize uniformity and conformity.

“*Carpe diem*” in direct contrast, compels the students to confront and claim these previously unacknowledged internal experiences. It demands self-awareness, spontaneity, and the pursuit of individual passion, directly challenging the suppression ingrained by the Welton system. By urging them to “*make their lives extraordinary*,” Keating encourages them to actively author their own narratives, thus working against the trauma's inherent resistance to coherent storytelling. However, this liberation also involves a profound risk. Embracing “*carpe diem*” means bringing the repressed self to the surface, forcing a direct confrontation with the very sources of the trauma (e.g., Neil Perry's oppressive father, the school's rigid authority). This confrontation, while potentially cathartic, can also be overwhelming, as it exposes the deep “wound” that the individual has been unable to process. Thus, “*carpe diem*” acts as both a catalyst for healing through self-reclamation and, tragically, as a trigger that can lead to devastating symptoms when the underlying trauma is too profound and support systems are absent.

For Neil, these words trigger an inner conflict: between following his inner voice and fulfilling his father's expectations. In terms of Caruth's Trauma Theory, this moment is the beginning of the trauma unconscious taking shape, where Neil begins to feel the inner pressure of two conflicting worlds emerging. *Carpe Diem* gives him hope, but also makes the social pressure he faces even more painful because he is aware of what he wants, but is unable to achieve it freely.

### **The Authoritarian Relationship between Neil and His Father**

Neil's relationship with his father reflects power relations that suppress and numb individual agency. Cathy Caruth emphasizes that trauma stems from events that “cannot be directly understood”, which then return in the form of psychic symptoms. For Neil, his father's total control over his academic and life choices created an inner wound that could not be expressed directly. When Neil was forced to quit theater, he not only lost his freedom, but also lost the meaning of his life, an unspoken traumatic experience that became a turning point on the eve of tragedy.



*Figure 3: Neil's father made a decision without Neil's consent  
(00:07:51 - 00:08:12)*

Neil's father : "I think that you're taking too many extracurricular activities this semester, and I've decided that you should drop the school annual."

Neil Perry : "But I'm the assistant editor this year."

Neil's father : "Well, I'm sorry Neil."

This scene shows a form of erasure of agency or self-autonomy. Neil tries to show interest and dedication to something he loves, but is immediately suppressed and neutralized by his father's authoritative voice. Neil's father's actions not only cancel ordinary activities, but also emphasize that Neil's choices and interests are meaningless. Through the lens of trauma theory, this act of parental authority is a deeply wounding experience because it repeatedly overwhelms Neil's psychological capacity to assert himself or integrate his desires. It creates what can be termed a "betrayal trauma" within the context of a supposedly protective relationship, where the source of security becomes the source of profound psychological harm. Neil's efforts to express his individuality are not just denied, they are neutralized, leaving him powerless and without a voice. This systemic invalidation leads to an internalized sense of meaninglessness, where his authentic self is deemed unworthy of existence.

In the framework of trauma according to Cathy Caruth, this is a form of traumatic experience that is not consciously recognized at the time, but leaves a deep psychological wound. Neil is indirectly forced to reject himself, a condition that creates disconnect between "who he is" and "what he must live". According to Caruth, trauma is not only about extreme physical events, but also about a person's inability to fully understand and respond to events that disrupt their identity and agency. When Neil loses control over something meaningful to him, this experience becomes a repressed memory, which can return at any time in the form of emotional pain.





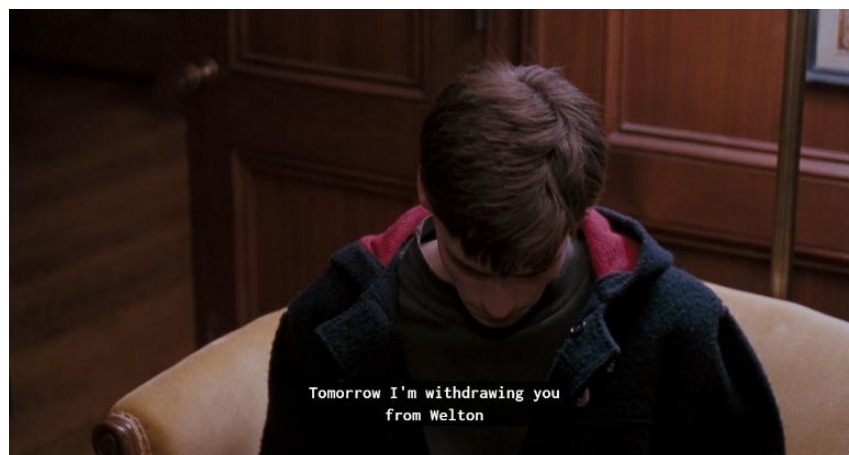
*Figure 4: When neil could only keep quiet and obey his father  
00:08:21 - 00:08:32*

Neil's father : "After you've finished medical school and you're on your own, then you can do as you damn well please, but until then, you do as I tell you. That clear?"

Neil Perry : "Yes, sir, I'm sorry."

After being decided by his father to quit the yearbook activity, Neil only answered with silence or nodded, then said "yes, sir" with a restrained expression. He did not express his disagreement. Neil's silent response reflects a coping mechanism in traumatic stress. When someone faces absolute domination without a safe space to express themselves, their body and mind can freeze. In Cathy Caruth's theory, this is called a response to an experience that is not fully responded to, namely when the trauma victim cannot speak or act according to his will.

In Neil's case, the word "yes" is not a sign of agreement, but a form of silent resignation full of inner suffering. This is where trauma works deeply because there is no space to express feelings, the suppressed emotions are embedded as unresolved wounds, which can eventually emerge in the form of emotional explosions or extreme decisions, as happens at the end of the film. This scene shows the psychological consequences of the neglect of personal voice, where individuals begin to lose the ability to protest or fight, even for things they love. In the context of Caruth's trauma, this is a symptom of the loss of recognition of one's existence.



*Figure 5: Neil was forced to enter Braden Military School  
(01:40:26 - 01:40:43)*

Neil's father : "Tomorrow I'm withdrawing you from Welton and enrolling you in Braden Military School. You're going to Harvard and you're gonna be a doctor."

Neil Perry : "But that's 10 more years. Father, that's a lifetime."

Neil's father : "Oh, stop it. Don't be so dramatic. You make it sound like a prison term."

After the play, Mr. Perry (Neil's father) scolds Neil and tells him that he will be expelled from Welton and put into the Braden Military School. Neil is not given a chance to speak, he just remains silent and accepts his father's decision. This scene is the culmination of pressure from the father's authority figure on Neil. The threat to decide Neil's education and future without his consent demonstrates the removal of self-autonomy. Neil cannot express his feelings verbally and he chooses silence.

Neil's silence in this scene is not a form of ordinary submission, but rather a symptom of ongoing trauma. He cannot resist, cannot speak, and has no safe space to vent his suffering. This inner wound eventually resurfaces in the form of an extreme decision: suicide. This scene shows how parental pressure can be the root of trauma, especially when the relationship that is supposed to be a refuge becomes a source of hurt.

### **Conflict between Identity and Social Expectations**

The conflict between Neil's personal desire to be an actor and his parents' expectation that he become a doctor shows a clash of identities. Caruth states that trauma is not just a memory, but a disconnect in self-narrative. Neil has difficulty integrating who he really is with who is expected by his environment. This mismatch creates an internal dissonance that eventually develops into a traumatic wound because he is unable to articulate, let alone fight for, his true identity.



Figure 6: Neil decided to audition for a theater performance  
(00:46:06 - 00:46:24)

Neil Perry : "I even tried to go to summer stock auditions last year, but, of course, my father wouldn't let me. For the first time in my whole life, I know what I wanna do. And for the first time, I'm gonna do it! Whether my father wants me to or not. *Carpe diem!*"

Neil enthusiastically tells Todd that for the first time in his life, he knows what he wants to do, act in the school play. Neil's expression is so alive and confident as he says this, indicating that he has found something that truly reflects who he is. This scene is a crucial turning point for Neil, because for the first time he consciously recognizes and claims his personal identity, not as his parents' child, not as a Welton student, but as an individual with his own desires and passions.

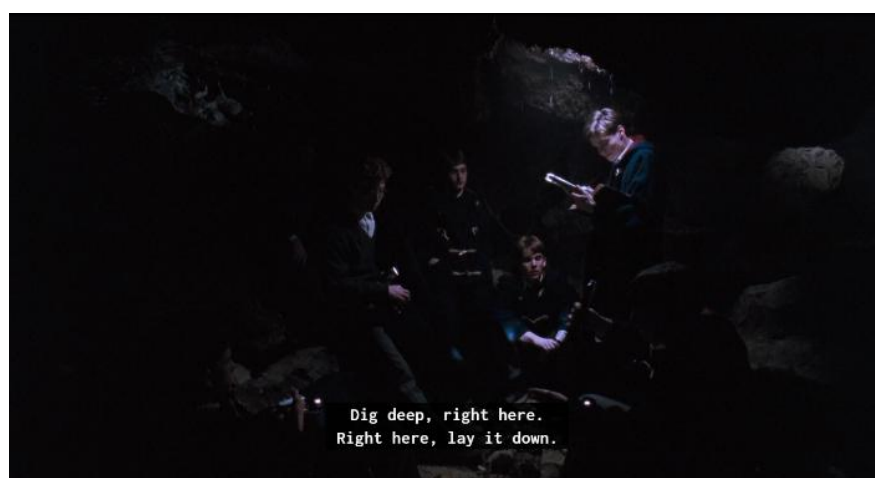
In the context of trauma, according to Cathy Caruth, this recognition of personal identity is a crucial moment because trauma often arises from the tension between one's own desires and the external pressures that force one to suppress or deny those desires. However, this moment is also full of ambiguity: Neil's happiness is actually fragile because he does not yet have full autonomy. The pleasure he feels is a form of acting out where he brings to life an identity that has been buried under pressure, but is not yet completely free from the threat of his father's authority and social expectations. According to Caruth, trauma does not only come from painful events, but also from the recurring tension between the desire to live authentically and the reality that rejects it. Neil is between two worlds, one that generates hope and meaning in life, while the other continues to haunt him with rejection and control. This conflict is one of the main roots of the psychological trauma he experiences. So while this scene may seem positive, it is theoretically the point where Neil's internal conflict culminates: between his self-expectations and the stifling reality of life.

### Mr. Keating's Role as a Self-Awareness Activator

A new English teacher, John Keating, has his own unique and different way of teaching from the other teachers at Welton Academy, an elite and renowned boarding school. On the first day of school, while other teachers disciplined their students in their classrooms, Keating did

the opposite. As soon as the students were neatly seated, Keating entered the classroom whistling and asked them to follow him outside. Keating began his first lesson by having a student read a poetic excerpt: *"Gather ye rosebuds while ye may. Old time is still a-flying. And this same flower that smiles today, tomorrow will be dying."* Through this poetic quote, Keating reminded his students that all humans will eventually die, and therefore, while still alive, they should dare to seize whatever they desire (Ario, 2018). Keating introduced the term "Carpe Diem," which literally means "seize the day." This scene symbolizes Keating's effort to guide his students toward freeing their passions. He wanted his students to be free to act without fear or hesitation. He inspires his students through poetry and encourages them to do what they love. Not only do they admire the way Mr. Keating teaches, but Keating's free-spirited personality makes them love him even more and apply it to themselves. However, the freethinking that Keating inculcated led to conflicts, "Poetry can make a weak person strong, or conversely, make a strong person weak."

Mr. Keating encourages students to think critically and achieve inner freedom, but in the context of Caruth's theory, this reopens the potential for hidden trauma. In other words, Keating facilitates the re-emergence of "voices" that have been suppressed by both institutions and families. For Neil, the courage to act is a form of "self-acknowledgment" that has been suppressed. However, when he was unable to maintain that choice in the real world, that realization turned into an unresolved wound.



*Figure 7: Neil and his friends try to revive a "Dead Poets Society"*  
(00:37:16)

One of the students found Mr. Keating's school yearbook, which was also an alumnus of Welton Academy. He saw an interesting thing, the "Dead Poets Society" and asked Mr. Keating about it and made the seven of them revive the dead/lost "Dead Poets Society", which was strongly opposed by the school. As the school found out, some of them started to get out of their zone and dared to do what they wanted, not what their parents wanted. The students secretly went to the cave to revive the "Dead Poets Society". They read poems, shared their thoughts, and slowly began to express themselves without fear of judgment. The scene shows a temporary safe place for students, especially Neil, to voice their hearts. The cave symbolizes a space free from the pressures of school and family where they can be

themselves. Through poetry and discussion, they make an initial emotional healing effort.

### Symptoms of Psychological Trauma Experienced by Neil Perry

Caruth explains that trauma often appears not in the moment, but in the form of recurring, illogical and often irrational symptoms. Neil's decision to hide the truth from Mr. Keating, despite their bond, powerfully reveals his acute identity struggle, a direct consequence of the psychological trauma he endures. His withdrawal, deceptive behavior, and profound sadness are symptomatic of a self fractured by an irreconcilable conflict between his authentic desires and his father's tyrannical expectations.

The trauma stemming from his father's consistent invalidation and the school's insistence on conformity has prevented Neil from integrating his true, artistic self with the dutiful, conventional identity forced upon him. Hiding the truth from Keating, the very catalyst for his self-discovery, is a desperate attempt to manage this internal schism. He cannot openly acknowledge his father's prohibition because doing so would mean openly acknowledging the crushing defeat of his authentic identity, and the surrender of the vibrant self Keating helped awaken



*Figure 8: Neil hides the truth from Mr. Keating: avoiding the reality that might come (01:29:56)*

The scene when Neil Perry lies to Mr. Keating that his father allowed him to join the play is a crucial moment that subtly yet profoundly reflects Cathy Caruth's concept of trauma. This lie is not simply an act of mischief or deception, but rather a manifestation of a psychological response to long pent-up stress and inner conflict that cannot be expressed directly.

According to Caruth, trauma is often not fully internalized or assimilated at the time of the initial event such as the constant authoritarian pressure from her father. Instead, trauma often emerges later, in the form of belatedness. Neil's lies to Mr. Keating can be seen as a belated attempt to manage or delay a direct confrontation with the source of his trauma-his father-which threatens his dreams and freedom. He cannot directly confront his father or even Mr. Keating with the harsh reality that he is banned, as it would force him to confront his hopelessness and helplessness. Neil's lies also show the aspect of "repetition" that is often

associated with trauma. Although Neil attempts to achieve his dreams through drama, he unconsciously repeats a pattern of surrender and helplessness before his father. These lies put him in an increasingly vulnerable position to emotional devastation, as he knows that sooner or later, the truth will come out and the confrontation he is avoiding will still happen. Trauma is not just about the event itself, but also about how it constantly haunts and shapes an individual's future behavior.

In Caruth's context, Neil is stuck in a cycle where he tries to avoid the pain from the past, which is the father's distress, through actions that actually exacerbate that pain. This is the essence of how trauma works, it constantly resurfaces, often in unexpected or distorted forms, until it is finally faced and integrated. Unfortunately, for Neil, that point of integration was never reached before the tragedy.

### **Tragedy as Accumulated Pressure without Solution**

Neil's tragic end-suicide-is a concrete form of unaddressed trauma. In Caruth's framework, death is not just the end of life, but also an extreme representation of the inability to process inexpressible experiences. Neil could not voice his suffering to anyone, and the feeling of being trapped in a system that did not understand him became a wound that eventually demanded "redemption" in the form of death. It shows how trauma can become a narrative that fails to be conveyed, and instead emerges through destructive actions.



*Figure 9: Neil committed suicide (01:47:21)*

In the middle of the night, after all exits were blocked, Neil woke up, put on Puck's crown, opened the window, then took his father's gun and ended his life. This act is the culmination of unaddressed trauma. Neil loses all control over his life: his identity as an actor is rejected, his voice is not heard, and the safe space, Dead Poets Society, is no longer enough to accommodate his inner burden. This scene occurs after his father says he will expel him from Welton Academy and put him in a military school. For Neil, this internal conflict was not just a phase, it was an escalating crisis of being. His father's final, non-negotiable ultimatum to withdraw from the play and enroll in military school became the definitive, catastrophic re-



traumatization. This act symbolized the complete and final erasure of his individual aspirations, his emergent sense of self, and any lingering hope for future autonomy. It left him with no perceived path for his authentic identity to exist.

Neil's extreme choice to commit suicide then became an 'acting out' or traumatic repetition of the unresolved experience. It is not just a response to the final incident, but an explosion of all the suffering that has long been pent up and never given 'testimony'. Suicide becomes the only way Neil feels to reclaim control of himself, a very dark act of autonomy, where he finally makes a 'decision' for himself, albeit a devastating one. In Caruth's framework, trauma, when left unprocessed and unintegrated, resurfaces as overwhelming symptoms. Neil's suicide, therefore, is not a rational choice but a desperate, compelled act as the ultimate, catastrophic symptom of a trauma that could no longer be contained. His inability to speak his truth, to articulate the depth of his despair to even Mr. Keating, highlights trauma's inherent resistance to coherent narrative. When all avenues for expression, negotiation, or escape within his oppressive environment felt systematically denied, self-annihilation became the only perceived, albeit tragic, act of ultimate agency left to him. It was a desperate attempt to end the unbearable internal conflict, to extinguish the unbearable pain of having his very self repeatedly invalidated and erased. Neil's suicide thus stands as a harrowing testament to the destructive power of unaddressed trauma and the devastating consequences of an identity fractured beyond repair. Neil's death is not only a personal tragedy, but also a symbol of the failure of a system that refuses to listen to the individual. The pressure of conformity destroyed his ability to live a life of his own choosing.

## **CONCLUSION**

A study of the film *Dead Poets Society* shows that the character Neil Perry experiences a series of emotionally and psychologically disturbing events. The film depicts various symptoms that arise from the stress of trauma, ranging from feeling emotionally disconnected from himself, to his inability to communicate and understand his personal desires. In addition, Neil's traumatic experience does not stem from just one incident, but rather an accumulation of various pressures, from family, educational institutions, and society that continue to haunt him and return in the form of unresolved inner suffering.

A number of factors contributed to Neil's traumatic experience. He lived in the shadow of his authoritarian father's control, who denied Neil the right to determine his own path. He was also in a school environment that heavily emphasized conformity and suppressed freedom of thought. When he tried to rebel and voice his desires through the world of theater, he was met with painful rejection, so that past trauma and unfinished inner conflicts resurfaced in the form of deep despair.

In an effort to survive, Neil exhibited behaviors that could be attributed to acting out mechanisms. He tried to appear happy, hid his anxiety, and chose not to be honest about his father's blessing in order to play theater. However, these actions were not a form of escapism,

but part of the process of internalizing an inner wound that he had not been able to fully understand. In Cathy Caruth's theoretical framework, trauma is not always present in the form of conscious memories, but rather through actions that cannot be explained logically. Unfortunately, the process of working through, realizing and processing emotional wounds that never really happened for Neil. There was no safe space or support to help him unravel the trauma. As a result, the mounting pressure and unhealed wounds pushed him to a tragic decision. Neil's tragedy is a clear reflection of how neglected trauma, when not responded to with empathy and space for healing, can destroy a person from within.

For future research, the writers suggest to expand the scope by analyzing the trauma experiences of other characters in the film "Dead Poets Society" or comparing the representation of trauma in various films or literary works with similar themes. The integration of other trauma theories besides Caruth, such as Judith Herman, can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the spectrum of trauma symptoms and treatments. Research can also explore the coping mechanisms used by the characters and explore the role of supporting environments, such as Mr. Keating and Dead Poets Society, in the trauma process. Finally, there is room to examine the practical implications of these findings for the education system or families in preventing trauma due to conformity pressure.

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