

Class dismissed

reviewed by [Daniel C. Richardson](#) in the [February 8, 2003](#) issue

From its opening sequence, *The Emperor's Club*, set in an eastern prep school for boys in the early 1970s, is behind the cinematic eight ball, and it knows it. That eight ball is the tremendously successful 1989 film *Dead Poets Society*, starring Robin Williams as the gadfly teacher who awakens in his students a thirst for learning and for a poetic experience of the world. *The Emperor's Club* encourages such comparisons, believing (wrongly, it turns out) that it can subvert and exceed the expectations.

The inspiring teacher in this case is William Hundert (played gracefully by Kevin Kline), who goads his students to learn about the contributions of the Greeks and Romans to Western civilization. Unlike the teacher in *Dead Poets*, Hundert is a favorite of both the administration and the students, so there is not much drama in this part of the story. The prospect of watching hours of his "masterful" teaching is a bit frightening. Thankfully, things get more interesting when Hundert is thrown off form by new student Sedgewick Bell (played by Leonardo DiCaprio clone Emile Hirsch), the ornery son of a senator.

Sedgewick challenges his teacher in a variety of ways--such as by a synchronized shutting of textbooks at the end of class--though none is particularly witty or creative. The audience is prepped for a battle between student and teacher, perhaps one that will illuminate some part of the generation gap that exists between the two. Alas, the clash never happens.

Instead, in a turn from Hollywood convention that is supposed to be intentional yet plays as quite arbitrary, Hundert goes slack. Rather than pit his belief in character and old-school standards against Bell's arrogant indifference, Hundert gives in. He lowers his standards, even bending his own rules in order to "reach" him (read: make Bell like him).

Hundert's efforts come up short, but the film still insists that Hundert is a good guy and a great teacher. The film's apparent message is that no one decision, for good or for bad, can decide our destiny. But that message might also be formulated this

way: no matter what efforts people make to change others or themselves, people pretty much stay the same. This is a simplistic, rather tragic formulation that the film attempts to avoid, yet cannot help falling into.

Toward the end, the film gives the characters one more chance to change, but by this time the viewer knows that the film (like Sedgewick Bell himself) is not as subversive or clever as it thinks it is. Those who would win at any cost are matched up against those who have dedicated themselves to playing well. It's Bell vs. Hundert again. While the film pretends to some level of complexity about this battle, it has no doubt which is the right choice.

At its best, *The Emperor's Club* explores the risky and often disappointing world of the classroom. But it's so intent on telling the viewer how to feel about what is going on, and so uncertain about whether it wants to be conventional or subversive, that the story is confused and incomplete.