

Different attitudes to the purposes of education in the history boys and the prim...

[Literature](#)



There are many different attitudes to the purposes of education presented in *The History Boys* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. We see many examples of Hector's traditional views on education compared to Irwin's pragmatic views about taking an unusual position in debates in order to impress examiners. The headmaster sees education in utilitarian terms and is more concerned about the reputation of his school than each of the boy's personal success. Then there is Mrs. Lintott who has a more minor role in the play and expresses that history should be about truth and fact rather than entertainment. On the other hand, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* features Miss Brodie who takes an unorthodox approach to education and teaches her students about life skills, such as skincare but neglects the formal curriculum. Miss Brodie hides this from the head teacher, Miss MacKay who has a similar view to the headmaster in *The History Boys*, as they both believe that schools should produce results and success.

The History Boys presents two interesting main teachers in the forms of Irwin and Hector. These two characters can be said to be vastly different from each other in terms of their approach to teaching. Irwin's role in the school is to teach history and prepare the boys from their university entrance exams. His view is that the boys should take unusual stances in historical debates in order to set them apart from the other prestigious Oxbridge candidates. Irwin argues that "These boys and girls against whom you are to compete have been groomed like thoroughbreds for this one particular race." (Act 1) In Irwin's view, the boys should argue towards the unconventional side because it will interest the examiners and make them stand out from the other candidates. "History nowadays is not a matter of conviction. It's a

performance. It's entertainment. And if it isn't, make it so." Their essays shouldn't just be about conveying their extensive knowledge on historical facts, it should be about writing this knowledge in a way that entertains or even shocks the examiners. Hector's role in the school is more general, Hector seems to encourage the boys to enjoy learning and to use the things they learn in life not just in examinations. As Timms says, " Mr. Hector's stuff's not meant for the exam, sir. It's to make us more rounded human beings." (pg. 38) Hector inspires his students and moulds them into bookish and highbrowed individuals. Hector's approach to education is rather traditional, whereas Irwin realises that education is more about competition. As Nightingale puts it, " Education is no longer about broadening and deepening the self (but) manipulating the system." Hector is a traditional teacher but he fails to understand that his methods won't help the Oxbridge candidates in their crucial examinations as they feel that they shouldn't even use the material they learn from him in their essays.

Furthermore, Irwin's approach to teaching is also vastly different to Mrs Lintott's approach, the reason that Irwin is even employed at the school is because the headmaster doesn't think that Mrs Lintott is capable of giving the boys that extra ' polish' that they require in order to be offered a place at Oxford or Cambridge. Although, it could be argued that this is a matter of gender inequality as men in the 80s, like headmaster, were reluctant to accept that women are capable of doing jobs just as well as men. However, there are significant differences in the way that Irwin and Mrs Lintott teach the boys history. For example, Mrs Lintott teaches the boys factual information about history so that examiners can see that the boys have

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extensive knowledge on history, whereas Irwin argues that, “ Truth is no more at issue in an examination than thirst at a wine-tasting or fashion at a strip tease.” Irwin is focused on the boys just getting through examinations and shortly after, forgetting everything they had learnt; whereas Mrs Lintott, like Hector, is pragmatic about education and hopes that the boys will hold onto their knowledge and use it later on in their lives. Similarly, teachers in the senior school in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* appear to take a similar approach to teaching. Teachers, such as Miss Lockhart, want the young girls to be successful in their subject and use their role to teach them important factual knowledge about the subject.

In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, Miss Brodie doesn't take the girls education seriously; instead of teaching the national curriculum and all the key knowledge they will need, Miss Brodie chooses to use lessons to talk about her life in her prime. She also indoctrinates the girls through telling them about all the 'good' things the fascist movement are doing, and also shares her makeup tips, views on poetry and art etc. As David Lodge explains, Miss Brodie “ tries to create the girls in her own image, and to direct their destinies according to her own divine plan.” Miss Brodie is moulding the Brodie into younger versions of herself and controlling their futures. As she says at the start of the novel, “ I am putting old heads on your young shoulders... and all my pupils are the crème de la crème.” Miss Brodie doesn't see the girls as her students, she sees them as different individuals that she can manipulate. However, the teachers in the senior school educate the girls properly and don't try to manipulate them. As it says in chapter 4, “ The teachers here [in the Senior school] seemed to have no thoughts of

anyone's personalities apart from their specialty in life, whether it was mathematics, Latin or science. They treated the new first-formers as if they were not real, but only to dealt with, like symbols of algebra, and Miss Brodie's pupils found this refreshing at first." Teachers like Miss Lockhart use their role in the school to educate the students effectively on their specialist subject and instead of seeing them as unique individuals; they see them as a group of students. Miss Lockhart is dedicated to nothing more than teaching science completely and effectively. Another important character in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is the headmistress, Miss MacKay. Miss MacKay disapproves with Miss Brodie's approach to teaching and often asks the Brodie set about information on Miss Brodie that could be used to have her resign. Miss Brodie also disagrees with Miss MacKay approach to education as she says, " To me education is a leading out of what is already there in the pupil's soul. To Miss MacKay it is a putting in of something that is not there, and that is not what I call education, I call it intrusion." However, many readers around the time it was published in 1961, as well as modern readers, argued that Miss Brodie was in fact intruding on the Brodie set by attempting to control even their love lives.

What is interesting when comparing *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *The History Boys* is that the main teacher in both the novel and the play are differing in many ways but almost identical in their approaches to education and teaching. For example, both Hector and Miss Brodie disapprove of the education system and examinations. Hector says, " I count examinations even for Oxford or Cambridge as the enemy of education. Which is not to say that I don't regard education as the enemy of education." (pg. 48) This is

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because he believes that results from an education cannot be measured. Miss Brodie also thinks that examinations are not important and that the girls shouldn't worry about getting a high grade and just scrape through. This is because Miss Brodie would rather use the girls lessons to talk about her own life. Similarly the style of Miss Brodie's and Hector's lessons are resembling. Hector's lessons are unorthodox and energetic, he often has the boys act out scenes or sing songs, as well as memorising literature that should help them in later life. However, this teaching style was not suitable for the education system in the 80s because it was more important to know a lot of facts than to have a deep connection with literature, which Hector fails to understand. The headmaster did not approve of Hector's traditional teaching style and said, " Shall I tell you what is wrong with Hector as a teacher? It isn't that he doesn't produce results. He does. But they are unpredictable and unquantifiable and in the current educational climate that is no use." (pg. 67) The headmaster is more concerned with results and league tables than whether his students enjoy learning and actually take something from it. However, critic Billington argued that The History Boys " highlights the meaning of education." This shows that some audiences of the play approved of Hector's teaching style as it is meaningful and he helped the boys to enjoy learning. In comparison, Miss Brodie also has an unorthodox teaching style as she chooses to teach the girls ' life skills' that she regards as important rather than teaching formal matters such as history. For example, in chapter 1 she tells the girls, " Safety does not come first. Goodness, truth and beauty come first." (pg. 7) This can be seen as dangerous indoctrination. As James Wood from The Guardian explains, "

Spark turns her novel into a deep questioning of authorial control and limit.” Spark uses the character of Miss Brodie to reveal the negative and damaging effects of a characteristic teacher, as the girls trust Miss Brodie and so will follow her beliefs. This results in a girl being killed after Miss Brodie convinces her to fight in the war for the fascist movement. As both Hector and Miss Brodie use unorthodox teaching styles, they often use physical barriers in order to prevent the headmaster/mistress from finding out. In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, Miss Brodie uses the physical barrier of books, during lessons, she often instructs her students to prop up their history books so that Miss MacKay would think they were just learning history. Similarly, Hector, in *The History Boys*, often locks the door during his lessons with the Oxbridge candidates in order to prevent them from being disrupted by the headmaster. Hector tells the boys, “ Whatever I do in this room is a token of my trust. I am in your hands. It is a pact. Bread eaten in secret.” (pg. 6) This quote could be alluding to Hector’s sexual encounters with the boys on his motorcycle, which also reinforces the dangers of having a trustful and charismatic teacher.

In conclusion, Alan Bennett and Muriel Spark present us with many different attitudes to the purposes of education in both *The History Boys* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. Despite both texts being set 50 years apart from one another, both texts explore the theme of education in similar ways. For example, there is the charismatic teacher of Hector and Miss Brodie who both reject the idea of an orthodox education. There are also the simple but effective teachers in the form of Miss Lockhart and Mrs Lintott, and then the strict and rigid headmaster and headmistress in both the play and the novel.

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However, Irwin from *The History Boys* could be said to be a unique teacher, as there isn't a character like him in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*.