

Bennett explores the fine line between wisdom and foolishness in 'the history boy...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Bennett explores the fine line between wisdom and foolishness in 'The History Boys'. Discuss with reference to this comedic drama. The fine line between wisdom and foolery has often been explored and blurred in dramatic comedies throughout the ages. Often, in Shakespeare's plays especially, the fool figure turns out to be the wisest figure out of all of the other characters, and is used as a way to make a comment on the social context of the time.

This theme is present in 'The History Boys', as Bennett mostly uses characters as a way of exploring the fine line. He also uses scenes and themes during the play to explore the fine line between wisdom and foolishness, but he tends to focus on using the characters to explore the line instead. The Headmaster is a character with whom, when first introduced to, the audience would appoint the title of 'foolish', as Bennett shows him to be a very foolish character.

However, this would differ from Shakespeare's fool; in his plays the fools were often the wisest of characters, but in this circumstance, with this character, the Headmaster acts foolish without becoming 'the fool' from Shakespeare, as the Headmaster doesn't have the hidden wisdom and knowledge Shakespeare's fools had. For instance, when discussing competing schools in the league tables with Mrs Lintott, he says '...Leighton Park. Or is than an open prison?

No matter...'. This quote shows the reader what a foolish man Bennett has created; a headmaster not knowing the difference between a competing school in the league tables and a prison is absurd. However, it helps Bennett

to show the fine line between wisdom and foolery, as some members of the audience may think that the Headmaster is wise in some of the decisions he makes, as he does know methods to get the students to achieve academic levels that allow entry into Oxbridge.

Another moment where Bennett explores the fine line is when he says, upon discussing Oxbridge with the supply teacher Irwin, ' I thought of going to, but this was the fifties. Change was in the air...' The first impression given of him from this line of speech is that the characters around him must be able to see through his lies and see the fool that he ultimately is; in the fifties, life was the same as in the forties; it was the sixties where ' change was in the air' and the characters around the Headmaster would know that he was trying to cover the fact that he wasn't academically smart enough to attend Oxbridge. This does show him to hold some wisdom, however, as he was smart enough to cover up the fact that he didn't attend Oxbridge, even if the lie wasn't successful, and that he is wise as he does want the best for the boys, but again, this is outweighed by the foolish decision that is to get the boys to Oxbridge to raise the school in the league tables to '...enhance its reputation and thereby his own career...' showing he is mostly trying to get the boys to do well for his benefit.

Bennett also uses the character of the Headmaster to make a social comment of the schooling at the time he wrote the play, hinting that headmasters of schools often tried to get the better grades for the students only to pull their school up in the league tables, and thereby improve their own reputations of headmasters. A second character Bennett uses to explore

the fine line between wisdom and foolishness is Hector, one of the boy's teachers.

One of the first impressions we get of Hector is that he is a character who Bennett presents to be very wise; he has taught the boys so well they can quote literature at any time of the day in the correct context '...Posner (Edgar) ' Look up, My Lord. ' Timms (Kent) ' Vex not his ghost...' This is quite a feat to achieve, and it also shows that he too knows and understands when and where to quote literature, again showing his wisdom.

However, this is a point where Bennett does show how fine the line between wisdom and foolishness actually is, as some people may view this skill as useless, as it probably won't be able to help them in their university or working life, unless they pursue a career where literature and the need to quote it is needed, so this act may be viewed as quite foolish; spending time teaching the boys something they probably won't need in their future lives, despite the fact that they and Hector may be considered wise for having this skill.

Bennett does show Hector to be a character who does act very foolish sometimes; ' No Headmaster, (He covers his ears. )...Non. Absolutment non. Non. Non. Non...'. The stage directions used here make Hector act like a naughty child who is refusing to stop what they're doing; a grown man, who is a teacher nonetheless, acting this way does appear to be a fool to people around him, even if they know he is only pretending. However, this is one of the moments where you can explicitly tell that Bennett is exploring the fine line etween wisdom and foolishness and is showing indeed how very fine it

is; some people may see past Hector acting like a fool and see him to be very wise; he knows that if he carries on refusing to do what the Headmaster asks of him, the Headmaster may well just give up and drop the subject. This could be down to the fact that Hector doesn't view the Headmaster as a wise man; more of a fool who you can walk over and expect to carry on doing things the way you want to, even if the Headmaster is against it. ' A hand on a boy's genitals at fifty miles an hour, and you call it nothing? This is a very important quote in showing how Bennett explores the fine line. Hector is a very wise man; he has a deep understanding and knowledge of literature, he has helped get the boys A-Levels up to the standards of Oxbridge and is, academically, quite smart. However, the quote shows that, in terms of his judgements, he is quite a fool; the acts he performed were frowned upon by society at the time, and show to many people that he has crossed the line between wisdom and foolishness with ease without really realising it. ...transmission of knowledge...' This also shows how his judgements are foolish, and how he can be seen to be a fool by many people; when he is confronted about his actions, he uses quotes from poetry to try to get out of the confrontation. By the end of the play, many people would probably see Hector as a very wise man, but a man who has the tendency to cross the fine line between wisdom and foolishness, whilst others would see him as only being a fool, despite his knowledge in literature.

Overall, Hector is probably Bennett's main way to explore the fine line between wisdom and foolishness, as Hector crosses the line countless times without realising it himself. Another way Bennett explores the fine line

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between wisdom and foolishness is by using scenes, such as the French Scene. This scene takes place towards the start of the play, and is where Hector and the boys practise speaking fluent French by acting out a scene of their choice in French. *Mais une maison de passe ou tous les clients utilisent le subjonctif ou le conditionnel, oui? ' (But a brothel where all clients use the subjunctive or conditional, yes? )* This quote is taken from the scene and helps to show the wise and the foolish sides of Hector; he and the students are acting out a scene in fluent French (which in itself is a very academic skill for the students to have learnt) and Hector is quite wise in getting them to practise using their French in everyday scenes, thus improving their fluency.

However, the foolish part is the fact that the scene they are all acting out is a brothel, which is a very foolish thing to do considering where they are (in a school), but the fact that Hector keeps on going on about their grammar whilst speaking French does show some wisdom, with the fact that he knows exactly how to get the boys to improve their fluency and grammatical skill in French, but in a very foolish circumstance. A third way the fine line between wisdom and foolishness is through themes; specifically the themes of sexuality and sex.

For sexuality; *'...Don't touch him...'* This quote is quite important in showing the fine line between wisdom and foolishness, as it is said when Hector and Irwin are discussing Hector's early retirement, teaching and Dakin. Bennett shows here that Hector's foolish decisions have turned him into a wiser man, who is advising Irwin on how not to make the same foolish mistake he did. The foolishness here makes the scene quite tragic rather than comic. For the

theme of sex, the fine line is explored when Dakin and Scripps have a conversation together about Fiona (the Headmaster's secretary). ...like particularly her tits, which only fell after a prolonged campaign some three weeks ago...' The wordplay in this conversation is very foolish indeed, which Scripps finds funny albeit embarrassing, but the wisdom in Dakin is evident by the way Dakin applies military logistics to a new context with ease, using the semantic field of war. Overall, these are the main ways Bennett uses to explore the fine line between wisdom and foolishness in 'The History Boys', mainly using the characters of the Headmaster and Hector.