

Sexuality in the history boys



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The complex exploration of homosexual relations that break the boundaries between pupils and teachers should be typically identified as scandalous, and as a form of paedophilia in a school. However, Alan Bennett presents the issue at a modest grammar school in Sheffield in a radically different manner. For Bennett's characters in *The History Boys*, such contact seems to be merely a normal aspect of school life.

Hector's character is constructed to be that of a "humane generalist" as depicted by John Sunderland for *The Guardian*, shown in Hector's worldly knowledge of the literature that he regards with compassion. His irreverence is equivalent to his passionate and almost religious faith in the power of literature as something that "is precious whether or not it serves the slightest humane uses". However, the complexity of Hector's nature is revealed in the juxtaposition of his passion for literature and his grotesque form. The construction of his character is depicted in his physical appearance as "a school master of fifty or so", old enough to be labelled as 'perverted' for groping the boys. Additionally, the way in which he conducts his "general studies" lessons in such an informal and familiar fashion presents bawdiness, which serves as an aspect of comedy for the audience. The mutual exploration of boundaries of authority and physicality in the relations between himself and his students demonstrates his familiarity with the boys through the comedic use of bawdiness in his lessons; he even cultivates the role of the eccentric professor by hitting the boys as a demonstration of his fondness. Apparently, "he hits you if he likes you". Furthermore, the way in which Hector "gropes" the boys in a sexual manner would cause his character to be alienated in a modern society as it is undeniably "not

normal” and repulsive behaviour, as the Headmaster later warns him, reinforcing the idea of Hector’s grotesque form.

The headmaster’s dismissal of Hector, after his wife witnesses him groping another student in public, is a test to the audience’s view on homosexuality. The headmaster himself sexually harasses his secretary Fiona; however, his actions are not challenged, unlike those of Hector, who is forced to have an early retirement due to his sexual preferences. Arguably, Bennett is subtly insinuating to the audience the prejudice and social stigma that was attached to the gay community during the 1870s. However, Alan Bennett does not directly condemn nor redeem Hector in the play, allowing the audience members to make their own judgement whether or not to criticize Hector’s character and his actions. Nicholas Hynter, director of the History Boys film, attended a school not unlike the one in Bennett’s play but confesses “ even in the 70s we would have found casual homophobia disgusting”, confirming that the portrayal of homosexual relations between the pupils and teachers to be an abnormal aspect of school life. The History Boys is an-almost fantasy creation of a world where the boundaries between teachers and students do not coexist and the views and values of a normal society are not upheld. The casual representation of homosexuality in the play to be, to a certain extent, accepted into society could be interpreted as Bennett’s way of addressing and subverting the controversy and negativity that was associated with public homosexuality in the 1970s.

The boys’ responses to Hector’s sexual harassment is notable and tells the audience that the boys have come to accept Hector’s behaviour as one of his many literate eccentricities and his defining quality that they endure as if it

were a ritual and an inevitable occurrence in their everyday school life. The way in which not one of the ‘ history boys’ condemns or questions Hector’s sexual behaviour presents a mutual bond of trust and loyalty they share. This is first shown to the audience in the French scene, when the boys help Hector cover up what was a scene at a brothel, due to the Headmaster’s sudden entrance into the room where Dakin is “ sans ses trouseurs”. The content of the scene is very sexual and thus highly inappropriate for boys of their age, further demonstrating Hector’s unsuitable teaching and misunderstanding of the legal and moral boundaries that should exist between himself and the boys in a school setting. Furthermore, Bennett’s principal purpose of the French scene is to serve as an aspect of comedy to the audience through the demonstration of role-play and bawdiness within the characters. Hector’s pedagogical friendship and the camaraderie between him and the boys against their common enemy of the headmaster are also further enhanced by this particular scene in the play. The boy’s judgement about Hector’s sexual desires gives them power over him that they refuse to use, despite how they know outside of school he would be perceived as ‘ perverted’. In their acceptance of Hector in that role, the boys seem preternaturally wise, and perhaps Bennett’s intellectually sophisticated construction of the History Boys with their sharp wit and ability and grace to negotiate in class, means they are easily identifiable to the teachers. Thus, the audience does not feel so quick to condemn the breach of boundaries between the teachers and students.

The character of Irwin is introduced to the Sheffield grammar school by the Headmaster to “ polish” the Oxbridge history candidates and give them an “

edge” to help them gain entry into Oxford or Cambridge, simultaneously positioning the school higher on the League tables (much to the results-driven headmaster’s satisfaction. It is apparent that almost immediately Irwin takes a fondness for the extrovert student Dakin, a ringleader among his friends and a “ handsome man” who uses the comedic device of mockery to make Irwin purposely feel uncomfortable by continuously referring to him as “ sir”. Like Hector he is a homosexual and is also perilously attracted to Dakin. However, Irwin rejects any connection to Hector’s sexual desires after Dakin questions, “ is it that you don’t want to be like Hector?” Irwin can be perceived as the young pragmatist, whose modernised teaching methods and young age are in stark contrast to Hector’s old idealistic and romantic views; his response and relationship with Dakin, in particular, differ.

While Hector’s approach to the boys is much more physical, Irwin seeks a relationship with Dakin and feels uncomfortable with his sexual ambiguity and innuendos in the ending scenes of the second act. Dakin’s character points out Irwin “ still looks quite young” and therefore that the characters are not that different in age. This arrangement further suggests to the audience that the sexual tension between Irwin as a teacher and Dakin a student is acceptable through Bennett’s presentation of homosexuality as a normal aspect of school life. Evidently Irwin’s modern style reflects his modern views and the changing morality of society and thus he understands why a boundary must exist between a teacher and a pupil and why he cannot pursue such a relationship with Dakin. Despite Irwin’s evasive technique, with Dakin serving as comedic method in the play, he eventually succumbs to his sexual invitations by agreeing to “ have a drink”, notably

outside of the school environment where the illegality and morality of the relationship is less obvious. However, the sincerity of the homosexual relationship between Irwin and Dakin is questionable, as he vainly admits that he “ couldn’t face the wheelchair” as a reason why he did not pursue his relationship with Irwin, which tells the audience the relationship between the two characters was merely physical and provides the audience with an insight into their shallow personalities.

Arguably, moral resolution was concluded at the end of the play in the form of the motorcycle accident which crippled Irwin and killed Hector, perhaps suggesting the sexual abuse the teachers inflicted on the boys was the ultimate reason for the calamitous accident and had to happen to produce a ‘ normal’ school setting for future generations. Within the portrayal of homosexual relations in *The History Boys*, although inaccurate and not a typicality of 1980s Britain, Bennett does not directly condemn the homosexual relations between the teachers and pupils. Through the subversion of the narrative, Bennett tells the audience how he would want homosexuality to be presented as a normal feature in society, one that is neither condemned nor questioned.