

The comedy in the history boys english literature essay

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



Alan Bennett's *The History Boys* uses the opposition created between the characters of Hector and Irwin to structure the play and question the education system. The two characters are naturally opposed - in age, teaching style and fundamental beliefs. This creates comedy which is used, perhaps to convey the playwright's personal beliefs and relay his experience with the 'Oxbridge' system. In Bennett's introduction to the play, he explains how he felt he had "cheated" to gain a scholarship to Oxford and as a result was unhappy there. The first meeting of the characters of Hector and Irwin sets up an opposition that remains for the rest of the play. The 'Brothel scene' is interrupted by the Headmaster and Irwin, and the boys are forced to pretend they were acting out a scene from the First World War. Perhaps this interruption is a comic reflection to the intrusive effect Irwin's method of teaching will have on Hector and the boys - they must forget the truth and lie, much like the pretence of the First World War scene (this in turn could be extended to the nature of the modern education system). Tension is therefore created by Irwin's intrusion, and also by the fact that he is clearly more knowledgeable than Hector ("comotionne", meaning shell-shock). This tension could be used by Bennett to polarise the characters of Hector and Irwin. The comedy of the boys pretending they are in a brothel "where everyone speaks in the subjunctive or conditional" is inflated when Dakin's character is caught by the headmaster: "Pourquoi cet garçon... Dakin, isn't it?... est sans ses... trousers?", and the boys have to pretend they were acting out Belgian First World War hospital. When Hector and Irwin's characters next meet with the boys in a classroom, they are discussing and debating the origins of the Holocaust. The lack of comedy in this scene is

highlighted by Irwin's treatment of the topic - the horror of the holocaust should be studied as objectively as any other historical topic. Bennett's use of structural juxtaposition allows for a huge amount of focus to be placed on the opposing teaching styles of Hector and Irwin by the audience (which is perhaps used to raise questions about the education system). Bennett uses the comedic structuring of each scene (comedy vs. serious) to highlight the other. Therefore, he could be using these two scenes to show how diametrically opposed Hector and Irwin are, in their philosophies of teaching. The playwright, it seems, uses Hector to propose the idea of 'truth' in education: "Why can you not simply condemn the camps outright as an unprecedented horror?", while Irwin tells the boys to "distance themselves". The National Theatre version of The History Boys uses a very focused set - a classroom and a staff room. In the play itself, Bennett notes that he deliberately didn't include many stage directions in order to retain the fluidity of the performance. One question raised by the playwright regards the 'notion' of education. Two views are offered through the opposition of Hector and Irwin's characters. Hector's teaching style is centred around truth; thoughtfulness - used to prepare the boys for 'life', rather than examinations. For example, Hector teaches the boys to 'learn the literature by heart' - "learn it now, and you'll understand it whenever". When Timms's character argues that "most of the stuff hasn't happened to us yet", Hector replies: "But it will... and then you will have the antidote ready!". Irwin's philosophy of teaching is centred around the idea that truth is unimportant; that education is merely a means to an end (in this case, Oxford and Cambridge are the goals). The staging here could be used by

Bennett to highlight the comedic opposition of Hector and Irwin. Bennett's use of the headmaster simplifies the opposition of the characters - Hector is "passionate... yet unquantifiable" and so Irwin is needed for results, where the headmaster's main foci are league tables. In this way, it is arguable that Bennett uses the comedic juxtaposition of Hector and Irwin (for example, their first meeting in 'the brothel scene', or more seriously the Holocaust discussion scene) to critique the aims of the current educational system. Bennett uses Hector's character to raise questions about truth. Indeed, he is shown as a strong advocate of truth, for example in the mock interviews held in the classroom: "Can I make a suggestion? Why can they not all tell the truth?" On the other hand, the character of Irwin is dead set against 'the truth', going as far as to say "What has truth got to do with anything?" It is made clear that Irwin's character believes that education is a game - and that the boys should cheat in order to achieve places at Oxford and Cambridge. The idea of 'cheating' is one that Bennett confronts in the prologue to the play, acknowledging himself to have 'played the game' by disregarding truth in order to achieve his place at Oxford. The playwright goes further to say that Posner's character may be a reflection of himself at sixteen, and he "winced" to hear Sam Barnett (who played Posner in the National theatre and film versions of the History boys) as his younger self. Posner's character is partly used by Bennett to reflect the negative effects of 'The Irwin method' of teaching. He was awarded a scholarship, he feels, for arguing that "Hitler was nice". However, what is made clear by Bennett is that Posner's character feels his integrity (both religious and personal) has been compromised in order to "pull [the school] up the table". The reality of

Irwin's method is gleaned when it is revealed that while at Cambridge, Posner suffered multiple breakdowns. This revelation disrupts the comedy of the play and perhaps causes the audience to question 'The Irwin method'. This could be a reflection by Bennett in regard to his unhappiness while at Oxford as a result of 'cheating' for a place. Furthermore, such breakdowns suffered by Posner could be a commentary on the destructive nature of modern education. Therefore, it seems natural that the audience would ally themselves with Hector's character over Irwin, after bearing witness to the perilous nature of modern 'education'. In terms of the context of reception, Bennett's use of Posner in this respect could be seen to be a commentary on the current education system - one where students are just statistics who are forced to play the game for a place at university. On the other hand, it is possible that Bennett's characters are not as opposed as they may seem. In some respects they are similar - the greatest and most obvious being their shared attraction to the boys themselves (in Irwin's character's case the focus of his desire seems to be Dakin, having been built up towards the end of the play) - "I wondered if there was any chance of your sucking me off". Hector's character displays a more overtly physical attraction to all the boys but Posner - groping them while on his motorcycle. Conversely nothing physical actually transpires between Irwin and Dakin, but Posner's character notices the attraction: "Our eyes meet looking at Dakin". Hector tells the boys that "the transmission of knowledge is in itself an erotic act" - does the comedic treatment of these sexual improprieties make the audience complicit in their development? In terms of the context of reception, any sexual relationship between a teacher and a pupil would be seen as a gross

abuse of power - yet the audience of the play are led to laugh at such 'abuse' (Hector fondling Scripps's Tudor Economic Documents). The final scenes of the play maintain the opposition between Hector and Irwin. Metaphorically, the motorcycle crash could be used by Bennett to symbolise the harmful nature of Irwin's philosophy. The comic moments leading up to the crash are juxtaposed with the crash itself; this is in itself comedic. Dakin comments: "trust him to lean the opposite way to everyone else." Is Bennett saying, that compromising our beliefs causes damage? Indeed, while Posner gained a scholarship to Cambridge, he is portrayed as feeling a cheat for "lying" - something that could be the cause of his multiple breakdowns. The audience are then invited, almost, to call into question their own beliefs and assumptions regarding education through Bennett's use of the juxtaposition between Hector and Irwin. Words: 1417