The History Boys

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ALAN BENNETT

Alan Bennett was born in Leeds, England. He attended Oxford University, and received his undergraduate degree in Medieval History. He co-wrote and performed in a comedy revue called *Beyond the Fringe* when he was in his mid-twenties, and this launched his theater career. Since then, Bennett has worked in theater, television, and radio. He has been an actor and a director as well as a writer. He is best known for his plays *The Madness of George III* and *The History Boys*. Bennett still lives in Britain with his partner, Rupert Thomas.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The History Boys takes place in 1980s Britain, when Margaret Thatcher was in power. The play does not directly reference the political context of the time, but some of Thatcher's policies affected Britain's educational climate. She cut funding significantly for British universities. After her 1988 Education Reform Act, schools had to follow a national curriculum and submit to periodic inspections. Such measures may have contributed to the Headmaster's insistence on quantifiable results from his teachers, thus creating a backdrop for the play.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The History Boys was turned into a movie after it was published, and it was one of many movies produced in the early 2000s that focused on Britain in the 1980s. Others included *Son of Rambow*, which focuses on two British schoolboys trying to make a film together one summer, and *This is England*, which examines 1980s skinheads and white nationalism. Alan Bennett has written many other works, including the play *The Madness of George III*, which he also adapted into a movie with British director Nicholas Hynter. He has often collaborated with Hynter, including on his 2009 play *The Habit of Art*, which centers on the poet W.H. Auden, who is also referenced in *The History Boys*. Hynter took over as the Artistic Director of Britain's National Theater in 2003, just before he staged *The History Boys*. He produced other new work by British playwrights at around the same time, including *Elmina's Kitchen* in 2003 and *On the Shore of the Wide World* in 2005.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The History Boys*
- **When Written:** 2004
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** First performed in 2004.
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary drama
- **Genre:** British Realistic Drama
- **Setting:** Cutlers' Grammar School, a fictional boys' grammar school in Northern Britain, some time in the 1980s.
- **Climax:** While taking Irwin home on his motorcycle, Hector has an accident. The crash cripples Irwin and kills Hector.
- **Antagonist:** The Headmaster is in some ways the play's antagonist. He is a strict and inflexible presence at the school, and comes across as anti-intellectual. He seems to care about the boys' Oxford and Cambridge careers for the wrong reasons.
- **Point of View:** Play

EXTRA CREDIT

Re-writing Posner for the stage. Alan Bennett changed and revised his script during the rehearsal process for *The History Boys*. He had originally written Posner as a boy who matures very late in life (this was based on Bennett's own experience). In one early draft, the play's last line was Posner saying, "It's not all bad news. My voice is breaking." But the play's director, Nicholas Hynter, said that it would be too difficult to cast a teenaged actor whose voice had not yet broken. Bennett re-wrote the part to remove this detail.

Cheating death. In 1997, Alan Bennett was diagnosed with terminal cancer. He began work on an autobiographical work called *Untold Stories*, which he expected to publish only posthumously. But the chemotherapy worked, and Bennett's cancer went into remission. He published *Untold Stories*, and in 2004, finished *The History Boys*.

PLOT SUMMARY

The History Boys follows two teachers and a group of students at an all boys grammar school in England in the 1980s. The boys are all trying to get into Oxford and Cambridge. At the beginning of the play, we see Hector, a beloved teacher in his 60s, leading his General Studies class. He congratulates the boys on their recent exam results, and says that now that their exams are over, their real education can resume. Hector tells the boys that they shouldn't be so concerned with getting into the most prestigious universities, Oxford and Cambridge, because there's a whole world outside of these places.

The school's Headmaster wants the boys to attend prestigious universities in order to raise the profile of the school. He hires Irwin, a young Oxford graduate, to teach history and give the

students extra "polish." The boys meet Irwin during a funny scene in Hector's class. The Headmaster walks in as they are improvising a skit, in French, about a brothel (Hector is using this method to teach the subjunctive verb tense). After this episode, Hector asks if anyone needs a ride on his **motorcycle**. We soon learn that Hector gropes the boys while they ride behind him on their way home from school. They discuss this matter-of-factly.

In Irwin's classes, he encourages the boys to explore unconventional positions in their essays, even if they don't fully believe them. He says that this will make them more competitive university applicants. Irwin begins to realize that the boys have a lot of literary knowledge from Hector's classes, but that they don't want to use it on an exam. He becomes more and more curious about what goes on in Hector's classes, especially when he finds that Hector conducts class behind a **locked door**. We witness more General Studies sessions with Hector, in which he reminds the boys that literature will help soothe pain and heartache later in life.

Irwin tells Mrs. Lintott another history teacher, that Posner, one of the boys, came to see him recently. We have already learned that Posner has a crush on his fellow student Dakin, but that Dakin is sleeping with the Headmaster's secretary, Fiona. Posner tells Irwin that he thinks he might be gay. In a narrative aside, Scripps (another student) says that Posner goes to Irwin because he has senses that they both have a crush on Dakin, and he "wanted company."

Soon after this, Irwin asks Hector to encourage the boys to use their General Studies knowledge on the exam. Hector says that some knowledge is not meant to be "useful." Irwin argues that education is for the present, not just for comfort in the boys' old age.

Near the end of Act One, the Headmaster calls Hector to his office. He tells him that he has learned of Hector's groping on the motorcycle. He asks Hector to retire at the end of the term. Hector quotes several lines of poetry, and begins to tell the Headmaster that "the transmission of knowledge is in itself an erotic act." The Headmaster shuts him down, saying that his behavior "isn't normal." He says that Hector and Irwin will share their classes for the rest of the term.

In the last scene of the act, Posner and Hector discuss a poem about a young soldier who died in war. They both seem to relate to the poem, which has themes of being an outsider. Dakin enters wearing a motorcycle helmet, ready to go home with Hector, but Hector shoos him away, and rides off alone.

Act Two begins a few years in the future. Irwin is now a historian on TV. A man comes to visit him on set, and we later find out that it is Posner. He asks Irwin about his relationship with Dakin, and seems to be writing a piece of journalism on the subject. Irwin gets angry, and Posner leaves.

The narrative returns to years earlier, back in Hector's classroom. The boys are joking around, and Hector becomes overwhelmed with discouragement. He puts his head on his desk, saying that he feels he has wasted his life. The boys are nonplussed, and Posner is the only one who moves to comfort Hector.

The Headmaster tells Mrs. Lintott about Hector's groping, and says that he's almost glad it happened. He's been wanting to fire Hector anyway, because Hector's results are so hard to quantify. He exits, and Mrs. Lintott tells Irwin that the Headmaster is a "twat."

In their first shared lesson, Hector and Irwin discuss the Holocaust. Hector and Posner argue that one shouldn't try to make a good point about the Holocaust on an exam, because this demeans the suffering of those involved. Dakin and Irwin argue that the Holocaust is an historical event, too, and can be discussed as such. A few scenes later, Mrs. Lintott, Hector, and Irwin giving the boys mock admissions interviews. Mrs. Lintott delivers a monologue about the way that women are marginalized in history while men get to make all the moves. Afterwards, Dakin asks Irwin about his time at Oxford. Their conversation becomes flirtatious.

We then hear from the boys, in narrative asides, about their exams and admissions visits. They have all received places at Oxford or Cambridge—even Rudge, who got in partly because his father was once a janitor at the university. Then Dakin confronts Irwin. While at Oxford, he learned that Irwin lied about being a student there. Irwin admits that this is true. Dakin seduces him, convincing him to come out for "a drink." He teases Irwin for being rebellious in the classroom, but cautious in life.

Dakin tells Scripps that the Headmaster often makes passes at Fiona, and that he has used this information to get Hector a reprieve. He says that he's going to ride home with Hector today, for old-times sake. When the Headmaster sees Dakin in a helmet, however, he forbids this. Instead he tells Hector to take Irwin.

We hear from Scripps, in a narrative aside, that the motorcycle crashed on the way home that day. No one knows exactly what happened, but Irwin was left crippled, and Hector is dead. The boys gather and share their memories of Hector. Then Mrs. Lintott tells us about their lives. Most of the boys end up successful in some profession, but Timms gets into drugs, and Posner ends up leading a lonely life, though he always remembers Hector's teachings. The play ends when Hector says that the lesson he really wanted to teach the boys was this: "Pass the parcel. That's sometimes all you can do. Take it, feel it, and pass it on."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Hector – Hector is the central character in the play, a beloved teacher who believes that his students should learn literature by heart in order to help them weather life's difficulties. His teaching style is irreverent and energetic. He often has the boys act out scenes or sing songs, and he seems unhampered by the usual school rules. He does not believe that exams are useful. The Headmaster deplores Hector's teaching style, because its results cannot be measured or quantified. We learn over the course of the play that Hector is lonely and dissatisfied in many ways. He has become disillusioned with teaching, he suppresses his homosexual desires, and he is in an emotionally distant marriage with a woman. He gropes his students while they ride behind him on his **motorcycle**, and this eventually leads him to lose his job. Dakin helps him re-gain his position at the last minute, but to no avail—Hector is killed while driving his motorcycle with Irwin on the back seat.

Irwin – A young, recent university graduate who comes to teach history at the school and help prepare the boys for their university entrance exams. Irwin's philosophy of education is about looking at questions from an unconventional angle in order to appear more interesting to examiners. It stands in stark contrast it with Hector's academic style. Throughout the play, we suspect that Irwin harbors an attraction for his student Dakin. Irwin becomes crippled in the **motorcycle** accident that ends the play, and spends the rest of his life in a wheelchair. He goes on to become a historian on television, and later an advisor for British politicians.

Headmaster – The Headmaster of the grammar school where the action of the play takes place, his real name is Felix Armstrong. He is very concerned with sending the boys to Oxford and Cambridge in order to raise the school's profile. He dislikes Hector's scattered teaching style, and hires Irwin to make the boys more competitive university applicants. He also sexually harasses his secretary, Fiona—and Dakin uses this fact as leverage against him after the Headmaster tries to force Hector to leave the school.

Mrs. Lintott – Mrs. Lintott, whose first name is Dorothy, is a lower-form history teacher at the grammar school, and the only female character who speaks in the play. She is very good at giving the boys a factual grounding in history, but the Headmaster hires Irwin to take charge of the boys' final year of schooling. He thinks that Mrs. Lintott doesn't have what it takes to give the boys "polish" for their university interviews. Mrs. Lintott is dry and practical. She is close with Hector, but also critical of him. In one notable monologue, she offers a feminist critique of history, reminding the boys that women are often left to clean up mistakes made by powerful men. At the end of the play, she relays the brief life story of each of the students, and Irwin.

Posner – At one point in the play, Posner describes himself this way: "I'm a Jew. I'm small. I'm a homosexual. And I live in Sheffield. I'm fucked." Posner's journey towards discovering his sexuality figures largely in the play. He feels attracted to Dakin, and doesn't know what to make of those feelings. His Jewish background also comes up, especially in the scene where the boys discuss the Holocaust with Hector and Irwin. Posner argues passionately that the Holocaust cannot be treated like just any historical event. At his Oxford interview, however, he downplays the Holocaust, and is praised for his "detachment." He receives a scholarship to Oxford, but eventually leaves the school, telling Irwin years later that it "didn't work out." In Mrs. Lintott's review of the boys' lives, we learn that Posner has few friends and spends a lot of time at the library. He has, however, taken Hector's teaching to heart, and this may give him some internal solace. Among the boys, Posner stands out as sensitive and scholarly.

Dakin – Dakin is charming, manipulative, self-confident, and handsome. This makes him popular at school, and at least three of the male characters in the play are sexually attracted to him (Posner, Hector, and Irwin). Dakin has a sexual relationship with Fiona, the Headmaster's secretary, and he also seduces Irwin (though they never go through with their plans to have sex). Dakin is also intelligent and often argumentative. Of the boys, he is the most drawn to Irwin's way of turning historical questions on their head. Dakin is accepted to Oxford on a partial scholarship. After his schooling, he becomes a highly paid tax lawyer.

Scripps – Scripps is Dakin's closest friend, a pianist, and an aspiring writer. He is a devout and practicing Christian, and he says that his parents don't understand this choice. Scripps delivers a large chunk of the play's narrative asides to the audience. They show him to be thoughtful and engaged. He eventually becomes a journalist, though he hopes to one day be a "real" writer.

Rudge – Rudge is a talented athlete from a working-class background. The teachers all underestimate him, and don't believe that he has much chance of being accepted to Oxford. Rudge surprises them, however, although he gets in partly because his father was once a janitor at the school. Rudge is brusquely honest throughout the play, and several times makes a blunt, insightful comment that cuts to the core of things. He eventually works in construction, helping to build "affordable homes for first-time buyers."

Fiona – She never appears on stage, but Fiona is the Headmaster's young secretary. Throughout the play, she is also seeing Dakin. We learn about her mostly in the context of Dakin's sexual exploits, which seem to be numerous. The Headmaster also pursues Fiona, and Dakin eventually uses this fact to try to keep Hector in his job.

Man – At the beginning of Act Two, we meet an unidentified man who seems to be writing some sort of journalistic piece about Irwin, Hector, and Dakin. By the end of the scene, we realize that this man is Posner. We sense that he is suffering from some sort of psychological trauma, and that he remains

deeply invested in his sixth-form days. He has left Cambridge, because, we learn, it "didn't work out."

MINOR CHARACTERS

Lockwood – Lockwood is a thoughtful student who also participates in the class's irreverent joking. He becomes a magistrate.

Akthar – Akthar is a Muslim student, a fact that is referred to several times throughout the play. He eventually becomes the headmaster of a school.

Timms – Timms is a funny and confident student. He often contributes to the class's lively banter. He ends up owning a chain of dry-cleaners and using drugs.

Crowther – Crowther is an aspiring actor and theater enthusiast. He is one of the quieter students in the class. He eventually becomes a magistrate.

Director – The director only appears in one scene at the beginning of Act Two, helping Irwin with his television history piece about King Henry VIII. He is pre-occupied with making a historical documentary that won't be too hard for people to understand.

Make-up assistant – At one point during the filming of Irwin's television documentary, a non-speaking make-up assistant brings Posner off the set when Irwin decides that he is no longer welcome there.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION

One of the play's major questions is about the general purpose of knowledge and education. Are they meant to be practically useful, to help students pass examinations and be quantifiably successful? Or are they meant to inspire personal growth and wisdom, and to help students through painful experiences? On the furthest end of this question is the grammar school's Headmaster, who sees education in utilitarian terms. He wants his students to attend prestigious universities, notably Oxford and Cambridge, in order to raise the profile of the school that he runs and thus increase its wealth and prestige. The Headmaster brings in Irwin, a young, recent university graduate, to give the students more "polish" as they prepare to compete for spots at Oxford and Cambridge. Irwin then teaches the boys to take unconventional positions on historical questions—even if they don't believe in the truth of their argument. Irwin thinks that this will make them more competitive candidates for universities. As Rudge puts it, Irwin encourages them to say that "Stalin was a sweetie," because this argument will set them apart. The play ultimately shows that Irwin's version of "thinking for yourself" is shallow. Recognizing the conventional argument and then arguing the opposite side doesn't ultimately involve much original thought. It's a way of appearing smart or funny, but not of truly grappling with a text or a historical event. Irwin doesn't make a career in academia—he moves on to journalism, entertainment, and politics.

On the other side of these issues is Hector, a teacher who represents the "old guard" of British education. Hector sees knowledge as a way to aid personal growth and help soothe emotional pain. Hector teaches the boys to memorize texts by heart, as he wants them to save the lessons of poetry and literature for life's inevitable hardships. Hector continually reminds the boys that Oxford and Cambridge will not necessarily make them happy—after you achieve a certain marker of success, life still continues on.

With the **motorcycle** accident that leaves Irwin crippled and Hector dead, the play ultimately comes down on the side that knowledge and education are most important as ways to deal with life's cruel randomness. Despite this, Mrs. Lintott observes that some of Hector's students go on to lead unfulfilled lives, guided by a misplaced sense that art can save them. Posner, the character who most fully adopts Hector's stance, ends up lonely, and with much less material success than his classmates. Hector's final words at the end of the play, words that come from beyond the grave, are that the boys should "pass the parcel. That's sometimes all you can do. Take it, feel it and pass it on." He knows that the game of success is small and inadequate in the face of our ultimate mortality. The point is to use literature and history as ways to more fully savor life. Like Hector's lessons, the play aims to leave the audience with more tools to answer their own questions about the purpose of life.

HISTORY AND TRUTH

The History Boys shows that history is ultimately random—both in terms of what happens, and in terms of what we choose to remember. Linked to this theme is the question of whether or not it is important to search for truth in the study of history. Irwin tells the boys that it is not important to be truthful in their arguments—as long as their arguments are unique and interesting. Scripps says at one point that in Irwin's classes, truth is just "another point of view." In his scene as a TV journalist, Irwin then demonstrates the random way that we remember history by showing that, when visiting an old abbey, people tend to be most interested in monks' ancient toilet paper. Yet Irwin's way of dismissing absolute historical truth sometimes leads to morally questionable results. This becomes most pointed in the boys'

discussion of the Holocaust, when Irwin suggests that the boys should put the event in context or proportion. Posner and Hector object to this, saying that such an argument diminishes the suffering and horror of the event in a way that is unacceptable.

At times, the characters step out to narrate in the midst of the action, and this effectively dramatizes the difference between the way events feel as they are happening in real time, and the way that we remember them historically. As the scenes unfold, they seem to have many possible meanings and interpretations. When a character steps out to narrate, they often add nuance to what we're seeing, making us feel that we've come closer to the "truth" of the matter. But these narrative asides also break up the emotional trajectory of the scene. A story told after the fact cannot fully encompass the emotions and dynamics felt in the present.

In the end, the play most poignantly demonstrates the randomness of history and of life with the **motorcycle** accident. Different characters narrate this event after the fact, and we don't see it occur onstage. Scripps notes that we don't know the factual truth of the story, but that Irwin has taught him to never accept a neat narrative. The play ends with this idea that there is no single historical truth. Life is always more complex, both emotionally and factually, than the historical version of it can be.

SEX AND SEXUALITY

The boys in the play are coming of age both intellectually and sexually, and these two growing up processes are often linked in *The History Boys*. In one scene, Scripps and Dakin compare Dakin's seduction of Fiona with the progress of World War II. Later, Dakin concludes that "history is fucking." The play raises major questions about the purpose of education, so these comments make us wonder, too, about the purpose of sex. Is it a realm of personal fulfillment? Or does it serve as a way to gain certain levels of success in society? A major plot point in the play is the revelation that Hector gropes the boys when they ride behind him on his **motorcycle**. When the Headmaster finds out about this, Hector starts to defend himself by saying that the transmission of knowledge is necessarily erotic—further tying these two themes together. The headmaster shuts him down, however, saying that his activity "isn't normal." This moment illustrates the ways that the boys will be asked to curtail their sexual desires to fit within certain societal norms as they grow up. It also shows, however, that Hector's vision of sex and knowledge has grave shortcomings. He sees them as ways to move towards personal fulfillment—but in acting on this idea, he has crossed a social boundary that is meant to protect his students, and he ruins his own career.

The play frequently deals with themes of homosexuality, and Bennett himself is gay. Hector is married to a woman, but his molestation of the boys suggests that he is repressing an attracting to men, and his friend and colleague Mrs. Lintott also suggests this. Posner is attracted to Dakin, and wonders if this is just a "phase," but ultimately decides that it is not. Irwin, too, is attracted to Dakin. Their homosexual attractions place these characters outside the realm of societal "normalcy" and lead to feelings of loneliness and frustration for them. The play ultimately uses sex and sexuality to illustrate the boys' processes of maturation, and to show that becoming adults requires working either within or against a set of prescribed rules for behavior. Conformity often leads to loneliness and lack of fulfillment, but society also punishes those who rebel against its rules. Adulthood requires that the boys balance these various demands, while also reaching towards a state of greater self-knowledge.

HOPE AND FAILURE

The hope of getting into Oxford or Cambridge is a driving force in the play. The Headmaster wants it badly for his students, and the students want it, too. Only Hector seems to understand that a prestigious university won't be the culmination of his students' lives and happiness—yet he doesn't have all the answers, either. Hector admits to Irwin that part of him wants the boys to "compete," and Mrs. Lintott suggests that Hector's teaching prepares the boys for their ultimate failure, rather than trying to guide them towards success. Similarly, Dakin argues at one point that "literature is actually about losers" who are compensating for something. Though he is being glib, Dakin's argument also rings true, given the experiences of the adults in the play. All of them have ended up teaching at the school after a life that is in some ways marked by failure. Hector has suppressed his sexuality, and is married to a woman. Mrs. Lintott has an ex-husband who told her lies, and she's now relegated to being a lower-form teacher. Irwin pretends that he got a degree at Oxford, but he didn't—he went to a less prestigious school, and then went to Oxford for a teaching certificate. He lies to cover up his feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability.

The culmination of this theme comes with the litany of the boys' accomplishments at the very end of the play. They all achieved their initial short-term dream of going to Oxford or Cambridge, but then went on to varying levels of success and happiness. One of the most notable biographies is Posner's. He ends up frustrated and alone, spending lots of time in the local library, living a "shadow life" online, and following his former classmate's successes from afar. The meaning of Posner's apparent failure is not entirely clear. He lives a rich life of the mind, but in poorer material and social circumstances. The play ultimately suggests that there is no way to live a life that is free of frustration, and that grand youthful hopes will always end in some degree of failure and compromise.

CLASS AND GENDER

The History Boys takes place at an all-boys school in England. It's a grammar school, meaning that students don't have to pay to attend (though they have to pass entrance exams), and the most prestigious schools in Britain are private schools, which primarily serve richer students. Irwin reminds the boys that they'll be competing against more privileged peers, like people who have traveled to Rome and can talk about that on the exam. Given their class background, the grammar school boys have a harder road to success. Rudge, in particular, comes from a working-class family. Throughout the play, people look down on him, condescend to him, and assume that he won't succeed. His father was a janitor—but he was a janitor at Oxford, and this fact ultimately helps Rudge get admitted. This is only the case, however, because Oxford apparently wants to make a show of progress by having the son of a janitor attend as an undergraduate. This situation helps illuminate the way that class figures in the play's overall argument about historical truth. Throughout history, socioeconomic status works in contradictory and sometimes random ways to affect the ways that events unfold. Class is mostly a hurdle for these boys on their journey, but at one crucial moment, Rudge's working-class background helps him. The play thus shows class as one of the invisible factors affecting history.

Another of these invisible factors is gender. The play calls attention to the way that women are edged out of positions of power and erased from history, and it also dramatizes this fact in its own structure. There is only one female character who speaks in the play: Mrs. Lintott. The others (including Dakin's love interest, Fiona) exist only when men talk about them. Mrs. Lintott even notes partway through the play that she has not yet been given the chance to have her own internal life through narration. Later, she gives a memorable monologue about the role of women in history, arguing that "history is women following behind with the bucket." Men take the lead and make the mistakes, and women clean up. She also says that men are better than women at skewing historical facts to suit whatever narrative they want. Mrs. Lintott's observations thus call attention to another way that history fails to be fully truthful—it often erases the experience of women.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

MOTORCYCLE

Motorcycles are often associated with rebellious male figures in literature and in pop culture. They're also often linked to male heterosexuality and machismo. Hector's motorcycle, on the other hand, is primarily associated with his homosexuality: he usually gropes the boys as they ride behind him on their way home from school. The motorcycle thus comes to symbolize Hector's non-conformity in a variety of ways, some positive and some negative. When Hector first enters in the play, he is wearing his motorcycle clothes, and the boys take off his outerwear, piece by piece. This scene suggests the ceremony that might surround a heroic figure (Hector's name also links him to a famously brave warrior in the *Iliad*). At the beginning of the play, before we know what happens on the motorcycle, it seems to make Hector seem strong and larger than life. He is in many ways a rebellious figure, rejecting the rules that society places on him. Yet this takes a more sinister turn when the motorcycle is revealed to be the site of his molestation of the boys. Ultimately we come to understand the motorcycle as the only place where Hector can act on impulses that he usually suppresses, and it is clear that his non-conformity also causes him loneliness and desperation.

THE LOCKED DOOR

The **locked door** of Hector's classroom sets it apart from the rest of the educational system. When Hector is teaching, he locks his door against Irwin, and even against the Headmaster. The locked door symbolizes the invisible pact that Hector forms with his students, agreeing that they will try to resist the forces of conformity together. This comes with its own dangers—most notably, Hector's secret molestation of his students—yet the locked door also creates a separate space for knowledge and self-actualization that doesn't exist in the rest of the school.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Farrar, Strauss and Giroux edition of *The History Boys* published in 2006.

Act 1 Quotes

 I was confusing learning with the smell of cold stone. If I had gone to Oxford I'd probably never have worked out the difference.

Related Characters: Hector (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Hector, the beloved "General Studies" teacher for the boys, gives an account of his own education. As a young man, Hector was much like his students--he wanted to go to a famous, old-fashioned school like Oxford or Cambridge; a place that oozed respectability and prestige. But Hector looks back on his ambitions of attending Oxford or Cambridge with a sad amusement. He never managed to go to Oxford--instead, he attended, a newer, less prestigious school. Hector insists that his education at this "second-tier" university was good for him: it's actually *more* difficult to learn in a stuffy, old-fashioned environment like Oxford, where the "smell of cold stone" (a great symbol for the overall sense of prestige and pretentiousness there) distracts from education.

In short, Hector sees through the "rat race" of applying to Oxford and Cambridge, and tries to convince his students that there are more valuable things in life--not least, a real liberal arts education itself.

> Hate them because these boys and girls against whom you are to compete have been groomed like thoroughbreds for this one particular race.

Related Characters: Irwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

In this interesting passage, Irwin--a history teacher who claims to come from Oxford--gives his students some advice for applying to Oxford and Cambridge. Irwin, recognizing that his students are working or middle class, tells them to despise the upper-class students with whom they're competing for acceptance to elite universities. Upper-class students have a huge advantage in applying to good schools: not only do they have the money to attend; they've attended elite preparatory schools like Eton that prepare them for study at university.

Irwin's comments characterize all of English society as a frantic race for success and respectability. The race is organized along class-lines: poor people are fighting with rich people (who have a huge advantage) for the same things. Education is an enormous part of success in England--in a way that has no true counterpart in the U.S. Thus, Irwin's intense, cold-hearted way of looking at university admission could potentially be justified by the vast importance of where one went to school in English culture.

> Dakin's navel, I remember, was small and hard like an unripe blackberry. Posner's navel was softer and more like that of the eponymous orange. Posner envied Dakin his navel and all the rest of him. That this envy might amount to love does not yet occur to Posner, as to date it has only caused him misery and dissatisfaction.

Related Characters: Scripps (speaker), Dakin, Posner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

Posner one of the narrators of the play, is gay, which makes his life intensely difficult at school. Posner, his classmates assume, is just immature--he doesn't talk about having sex with women because he's so inexperienced. In actuality, Posner doesn't participate in sexual conversations with his friends because he's attracted to his friends (mostly Dakin), not to women. And even Posner, we're told by his best friend, Scripps, isn't totally aware of his own sexuality at this point in the play: homosexuality is so foreign to his tiny town of Sheffield that he has no way of understanding his own feelings for Dakin, and instead sees them as jealousy rather than attraction.

> You give them an education. I give them the wherewithal to resist it.

Related Characters: Hector (speaker), Mrs. Lintott

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Hector the schoolmaster makes a clear distinction between learning and education. "Education," as most of the schoolteachers think of it, is a means to an end--a way for the working-class students of Sheffield to wise up, go to Oxford or Cambridge, and eventually have a successful life. Hector finds such a worldview incredibly naive--going to a good university won't make his students

happy, even if their headmaster and other teachers insist that it will. Hector sees his duty to his students in almost Romantic terms: his job is to teach young men how to use poetry, music, and culture to find spiritual satisfaction. In other words, Hector idealizes his role as an educator, hoping that his students will learn to use culture to resist the rat-race of competition and materialistic success.

> There's no better way of forgetting something than by commemorating it.

Related Characters: Irwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Irwin discusses the history of the First World War with his history students. Irwin asks his students for their interpretations of World War I, then becomes irritated when they offer an obvious, "vanilla" theory of history. Irwin tries to stir things up by suggesting that Britain was largely responsible for both world wars, and that the British war poets (such as Wilfred Owen) wrote poetry that *seemed* to criticize the war in order to soothe their country's guilty conscience.

Irwin's interpretation of World War I is cleverly counterintuitive--and it might not be true at all. As Irwin admits, university applications don't have anything to do with being true--the point is to be clever, counterintuitive, and generally surprising. In short, the passage shows Irwin teaching his students to sacrifice their commitment to truth in favor of "wow factor"--an apt description of the way the students leave behind their moral beliefs and their academic innocence in order to attend elite schools.

> With respect, can I stop you? No, with a poem or any work of art we can never say 'in other words.' If it is a work of art there are no other words.

Related Characters: Timms (speaker), Irwin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

Irwin proceeds to teach his history students about World War I by discussing the poetry of Rudyard Kipling, among others. Irwin goes over a poem, then tries to summarize it, beginning, "In other words." His student, Timms, cuts him off, claiming that summarizing poetry is meaningless--poetry has an intrinsic beauty that can never be paraphrased.

The clash between Irwin and TImms illustrates the basic difference between Irwin's model of education and Hector's (it's suggested that Timms is pretty much parroting Hector's ideas here). Irwin sees education as a means to an end: by the same token, information needs to be translated, interpreted, and "packaged" into a lesson or a "takeaway." Hector has taught his students, including Timms, to have more respect for history, art, and literature--the point isn't to reduce everything to a "lesson"; rather, it's to grasp the nuances and emotional truth of the book, poem, or historical event.

> Truth is no more at issue in an examination than thirst at a wine-tasting or fashion at a strip-tease.

Related Characters: Irwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Irwin further complicates the relationship between truth and success in the university application process. He's lecturing his students about the history of World War I, and tries to press the point that it's more important to *wow* the Oxford admissions panel than it is to be "correct." A creative, sexily counterintuitive argument in a history essay is far more attractive than a safe, predictable, well-written essay.

Irwin is a skilled rhetorician and a smooth arguer. Here, he makes it seem as if the desire for truth is somehow boring or primitive; a mere distraction from what "really counts" (in this case, getting accepted to Oxbridge). His use of a "strip-tease" as an example also furthers his own argument--using a risque subject to make his point seem more appealing and interesting (and to make himself seem "cooler" and more relatable to his students). Irwin's students at school have been taught to use art and literature to explore timeless truth--now, however, Irwin is telling them to ignore truth altogether.

TIMMS: Sir, I don't always understand poetry.
HECTOR: You don't always understand it? Timms, I never understand it. But learn it now, know it now and you'll understand it whenever.
TIMMS: I don't see how we can understand it. Most of the stuff poetry's about hasn't happened to us yet.
HECTOR: But it will, Timms. It will. And then you will have the antidote ready! Grief. Happiness. Even when you're dying. We're making your deathbeds here, boys.

Related Characters: Hector, Timms (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Hector's view of education is again at loggerheads with the realities of the scholastic world. Hector teaches his students that it's more important to embrace and memorize poetry in the present, so that somewhere down the line, it will give his students spiritual and intellectual nourishment when they need it more. Hector refuses to think in terms of university applications or materialistic success. He's just the opposite of Irwin, who speaks of using poetry to "add flavor" to one's admissions essay. Hector would never think of "using" poetry for such a narrow, practical purpose--poetry, he believes is something nobler and more powerful than that, useful for things like accepting one's mortality or finding meaning in grief and suffering. In his own way, Hector and Irwin agree that poetry is "useful"--but where Irwin thinks of poetry's use in practical terms, Hector argues that poetry has a spiritual or emotional use.

History nowadays is not a matter of conviction. It's a performance. It's entertainment. And if it isn't, make it so.

Related Characters: Irwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

In his classroom, Irwin continues to stress that learning about history has little, if anything, to do with the truth. History, by contrast, is all about performing and entertaining. What does Irwin mean?

In one sense, Irwin's statement could be interpreted in a strictly academic light. When Irwin says, "history nowadays," he means the subject as it's taught in schools: in order to wow Cambridge, in other words, history essays should be dazzling, counterintuitive, and generally "sexy," regardless of whether they're right or not. In a broader sense, though, Irwin's words could be interpreted as a commentary on the very nature of history itself. As the saying goes, history is written by the victors--human memory is unreliable, people exaggerate or bias facts, and important documents and artifacts are defaced or lost. Thus the very idea of being sure of history as perfectly "true" is unrealistic, and perhaps it's better to embrace Irwin's cynical view that history is, and always has been, a kind of fiction.

One of the hardest things for boys to learn is that a teacher is human. One of the hardest things for a teacher to learn is not to try and tell them.

Related Characters: Mrs. Lintott (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

In this touching scene, Irwin reports to Mrs. Lintott that Posner has come to him, worried that he might be gay. Irwin confesses that he wasn't sure what to tell his student--he was even tempted to admit that he's "in the same boat." Irwin doesn't explain to Mrs. Lintott exactly what he means by "the same boat" (Irwin is also gay? He's also lonely? He's also used to falling in love with people who don't love him back?).

The passage is important because it shows Irwin--previously, a cocky, intimidatingly smooth, figure--is actually sad, lonely man; hardly the "image of success" that an Oxbridge graduate should be. Irwin's loneliness is especially poignant because he was hired to inspire the boys to successfully apply to Oxford and Cambridge--and yet Irwin's entire life is proof that going to a great school doesn't buy happiness. Mrs. Lintott illustrates Irwin's problem by noting that teachers always face the temptation to confess their humanity to their own students. The true burden of a good teacher, it's suggested, is to remain professional, confident, and generally authoritative, in order to inspire one's students--even if it's easier to be imperfectly human with them.

I'm a Jew.
I'm small.
I'm homosexual.
And I live in Sheffield.
I'm fucked.

Related Characters: Posner (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Posner sums up his life in the bleakest of terms. He's an outsider in every conceivable sense: religious, sexual, aesthetic, and cultural.

It's worth taking those "senses" one at a time. First, Posner is Jewish. In the U.K., anti-Semitism remained common in mainstream society well into the 20th century (and arguably still does today). Posner is at odds with his classmates, for whom going to church is a vital part of community life. Second, Posner is gay--a hard thing for anyone living in a close-knit, conservative community. (Bennet is a homosexual himself, and may have modeled Posner on his own experiences growing up.) Posner is also small, and therefore, he assumes, unattractive. Finally, he's from a small, working-class community, meaning that he has few if any chances at social mobility. More keenly than his peers, Posner wants to go to a great school--he thinks that by going to Cambridge, he can escape the misery of his small-town life.

DAKIN: The more you read, though, the more you see that literature is actually about losers.
SCRIPPS: No.
DAKIN: It's consolation. All literature is consolation.

Related Characters: Scripps, Dakin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, two students, Dakin and Scripps, give their interpretations of the arts, suggesting the diverging paths their intellectual development has taken. Dakin sees literature as a kind of medicine, designed to make people feel better when they're sad or lonely. Scrips seems to think of the arts as more universal and nuanced.

Dakin and Scripps's diverging interpretations of the arts says a lot about their personalities. Dakin is popular and charismatic--by suggesting that literature is about losers, he suggests that he himself doesn't need literature as much as the other "history boys"; he's so popular and well-liked that Eliot and Yeats don't apply to him. Scripps, a more lonely, introspective boy, thinks of art as something that helps everyone--whether you're charismatic or not, art can make your life better.

I count examinations, even for Oxford and Cambridge, as the enemy of education. Which is not to say that I don't regard education as the enemy of education, too.

Related Characters: Hector (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Irwin clashes with Hector over the true meaning of education. Irwin is trying to convince Hector to allow his students to use their vast knowledge of poetry, film, and art to write better admissions essays for Oxford and Cambridge. Hector then distinguishes between true education and the kinds of shallow essays that (presumably) guarantee acceptance to Oxford and Cambridge. Hector doesn't see any value in using poetry for material, literal success--poetry should exist on a purely spiritual level, providing comfort and solace for students.

Although Hector makes a persuasive argument for keeping admissions essays and art separate, his words are tinged with sadness. He suggests that education may itself be the enemy of education. One possible interpretation of these lines is that any kind of "teaching" is by nature enforcing conformity and stifling creativity. Another is that Hector questions whether his own love for poetry has made him any happier after all. Hector loves to teach his students to use the arts to improve their own lives, and yet Hector himself seems lonely and isolated, in spite of his vast knowledge of culture. Education is his enemy, not his friend--it's merely reminded him of his own sadness.

HECTOR: Codes, spells, runes — call them what you like, but do not call them gobbets.
IRWIN: I just thought it would be useful…
HECTOR: Oh, it would be useful…every answer a Christmas tree hung with the appropriate gobbets. Except that they're learned by heart. And that is where they belong and like the other components of the heart not to be defiled by being trotted out to order.
IRWIN: So what are they meant to be storing them up for, these boys? Education isn't something for when they're old and grey and sitting by the fire. It's for now. The exam is next month.
HECTOR: And what happens after the exam? Life goes on. Gobbets!

Related Characters: Irwin, Hector (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48-49

Explanation and Analysis

Irwin has just praised Hector for giving his students vast quantities of "gobbets" of information. Hector immediately takes offense at Irwin's use of such a word, instead suggesting that the information Hector has passed to his students is a kind of magical secret--"codes, spells, runes."

A "gobbet," it's important to know, is a lump or morsel of food--Irwin metaphorically implies that Hector is "nourishing" his children with culture during his General Studies lessons. And yet Hector is irritated with Irwin's use of the word. Art and culture, he insists, aren't just objects to be gobbled up and digested by his students--rather, culture must be stored over time, so that years from now, the students will be able to turn to poetry and music for their spiritual satisfaction.

The differences between Irwin and Hector couldn't be plainer. Irwin thinks in short-term, highly practical terms: he wants his students to pass their exams this year. Hector, by contrast, seems to respect his students on a deeper level--he wants them to be happy in life, not just successful with their university applications. And yet he also doesn't accept that for many of them, life really *could* be better if they got into an elite college.

HECTOR: The transmission of knowledge is in itself an erotic act. In the Renaissance…
HEADMASTER: Fuck the Renaissance. And fuck literature and Plato and Michaelangelo and Oscar Wilde and all the other shrunken violets you people line up. This is a school and it isn't normal.

Related Characters: Headmaster, Hector (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

Here the Headmaster of the school speaks to Hector about his alleged sexual misconduct with his students. The Headmaster has learned that Hector rides on a motorcycle with his students, and sometimes gropes them. Furthermore, he now also believes that Hector molests his students during his classes--hence the locked door.

Hector begins to justify his sexual behavior to the Headmaster by citing the supposed proximity between education and eroticism. But the Headmaster will have no part of it: he dismisses Hector along with the long tradition of homoerotic intellectual figures (including Plato, who in his dialogue the *Symposium* claimed that true enlightenment is only possible with homosexual sex), claiming that Hector's attachment to his students isn't "normal."

Who's right here? It's possible to sympathize with Hector even as we recognize that he's abused his power and molested minors. Hector, presumably a closeted homosexual, has no outlets for his sexual desires--thus, he satisfies his urges by groping his students on the motorcycle. Hector genuinely cares about his children, yet he also uses them for his own pleasure. (There's a long tradition of gay English schoolteachers, including Auden and Ruskin.) At the same time, the boys are still *boys*, and so they can't really consent to this, even if they seem to go along with it, and the molestation could (and will) affect them for the rest of their lives.Hector's behavior is thus both extremely immoral and deeply sympathetic.

The best moments in reading are when you come across something — a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things — which you had thought special and particular to you. Now here it is, set down by someone else, a person you have never met, someone even who is long dead. And it is as if a hand has come out and taken yours.

Related Characters: Hector (speaker), Posner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

At the finale of Act I, Hector puts into action his theory that

education is an erotic act. He discusses poetry with his student, Posner. As the conversation goes on, Hector makes a complicated analogy that shows his deep knowledge of the experience of reading. He argues that reading is most pleasurable when the reader feels an intense spiritual connection with the author--when the reader realizes that the author feels the same subtle, nuanced emotion that he (the reader) has secretly felt before.

It's important to note that Hector's description of reading is also sensual and even romantic--to read a great book, he suggests, is to love its author (the metaphor of the "hand" is particularly revealing). Hector seems to be on the verge of touching Posner with his own hand (though nothing happens). In all, the scene is tragic in that it shows Hector to be a sincere yet deeply frustrated man--someone who genuinely respects the spiritual aspect of education and yet *also* abuses his power to satisfy his own closeted sexual needs.

Act 2 Quotes

❝ It is a sad fact that whatever the sublimity and splendour of the ruins of our great abbeys to the droves of often apathetic visitors the monastic life only comes alive when contemplating its toilet arrangements.

Related Characters: Irwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

In this "flash forward," we learn that Irwin, years after teaching the students in Sheffield, finds work as a TV educator: he guides viewers through the medieval abbeys of England, sensationalizing their history. Irwin has a natural intuition for the aspects of history that prove most entertaining and amusing--for instance, when touring the abbeys, he focuses on the buildings' bizarre toilet facilities.

Irwin's approach to touring the abbeys is an apt metaphor for the way he views culture in general. He's more concerned with providing a novel or counterintuitive interpretation of a familiar cultural artifact than he is in building genuine respect or interest in the object. Thus, he's more interested in a witty essay on World War I than he is in the facts of the war; more interested in interpreting Kipling than he is in the beauty of Kipling's poetry; more interested in the abbey's toilets than the abbey in all its medieval majesty. (Or if *he*'s not necessarily more interested in these things, he at least realizes that others are, and so gives them what they want.)

❝ What made me piss my life away in this god-forsaken school? There's nothing of me left. Go away. Class dismissed. Go.

Related Characters: Hector (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

Hector begins to question his own philosophy of education and truth. Hector has spent his entire adult life teaching his students that poetry and art are valuable because they nourish the soul--yet he's also used his students for his own sexual pleasure. Now that Hector has been "found out," he begins to wonder if he was wrong to focus to exclusively on the spiritual side of education. In the middle of a lesson, Hector weeps into his desk, claiming that he's wasted his life.

What does Hector mean, "There's nothing of me left?" Hector has devoted his entire life to educating his students--now that he's been pressured to resign from school (since the Headmaster has found out about his acts of molestation), he sees his life in ruins. In a slightly different sense, Hector's resignation is symbolic of the school's changing philosophy of education: Hector's lofty, idealistic approach to the liberal arts is fading away, replaced by the more practical methods of Irwin. Notice, too, that in his moment of crisis, Hector seems not to derive any strength or satisfaction from poetry and art--in other words, he can't do the very thing he's always encouraged his students to do in times of depression.

❝ 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.

Related Characters: Headmaster (speaker), Mrs. Lintott, Hector

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

In this surprising scene, the Headmaster reveals that his "problem" with Hector doesn't really have anything to do with Hector's acts of molestation--supposedly, the reason the Headmaster wanted Hector to resign. On the contrary, the Headmaster has long been unsatisfied with Hector's approach to education. Hector educates his students in poetry and art, but doesn't prepare them to succeed in tests or university applications. In the current education environment--where everything is about numbers and concrete results--there's no place for an old-fashioned liberal arts teacher like Hector. He's got to go; and the Headmaster is happy that he had a specific reason (the molestations) to ask Hector to resign. The Headmaster, one could say, is a barometer for the educational environment in England at the time--he understands that the times are changing, and students need to be better-prepared for tests, even if they have to sacrifice some of their love for the arts in the process.

> What's all this learning by heart for, except as some sort of insurance against the boys' ultimate failure?

Related Characters: Mrs. Lintott (speaker), Hector

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mrs. Lintott reveals that she doesn't really admire Hector's approach to education any more than she admires Irwin's. Hector teaches his students to embrace art and poetry as "medicines" against suffering and loneliness. In doing so, Hector confirms his own loneliness and suffering--he's spent his entire adult life feeling lonely and sorry for himself, so it's only natural that he should pass on his pessimistic philosophy of poetry to his students.

Another way of interpreting Hector's educational philosophy is that Hector teaches his students how to accept and make light of their sadness, but doesn't actually teach them how to escape sadness. Irwin thinks that education is a tool with which students can "rise" in life, while Hector thinks it's a way for students to accept their fate (assuming that they never rise at all). Neither view of education is entirely satisfactory, Bennet suggests--the truth, as with everything in life, lies somewhere in the middle.

> I didn't teach you and Wittgenstein didn't screw it out of his very guts in order for you to turn it into a dinky formula.

Related Characters: Hector (speaker), Dakin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

Here Hector has a moving conversation with his student, Dakin. In the past, Hector taught his students a famous quote from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (like Hector, a lonely schoolteacher, probably homosexual): "whereof we cannot speak, we must pass over in silence." Dakin repeats the Wittgenstein quote here, and tells Hector that he'll use it on his university admissions exams. Hector is furious that Dakin is using Hector's lessons for such practical, materialistic aims. Hector accuses Dakin of reducing the complexity and majesty of Wittgenstein to a mere sound-bite--in applying to university, Dakin has lost all respect for philosophy.

In short, the passage shows that Dakin is beginning to gravitate toward Irwin's philosophy of education--the philosophy that sees art and culture as ways of "flavoring" a university essay to win some extra points. Hector is disgusted with such a reductive way of thinking about culture--and doubly disgusted that his own pupils are "betraying" him by agreeing with Irwin.

> What has truth got to do with it? I thought that we'd already decided that for the purposes of this examination truth is, if not an irrelevant, then so relative as just to amount to another point of view.

Related Characters: Scripps (speaker), Irwin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Irwin talks about the Holocaust with his

students, and finds himself questioning his own relativist view of history and truth. Irwin is a little surprised to find his students arguing--cleverly and counterintuitively, just as he's taught them--that the Holocaust must be analyzed within the framework of German foreign policy; in other words, that the evil of the Holocaust was not by any means absolute.

When Irwin tries to correct his students' view of the Holocaust, his pupil Scripps interrupts him and spitefully throws Irwin's words back in his face. Irwin's sexy, counterintuitive view of history and truth, we begin to see, has its limits--there appear to be some historical events, and some truths, that are beyond relativism and counterintuitive thinking. The Holocaust really was as horrific and evil as it's generally regarded to be--no amount of augmentative pyrotechnics can change that fact. Irwin's ideas about essay-writing and history have their limits, and can even be callous and cruel when they hit home to someone's personal experience.

> How do I define history? It's just one fucking thing after another.

Related Characters: Rudge (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, a student named Rudge has been called before his teachers, including Irwin and Mrs. Lintott, to go through a mock admissions interview. Rudge is asked how he defines history--in response he characterizes it as "one fucking thing after another."

The irony of the scene is that Rudge's answer, while blunt and inappropriate for an Oxford admissions interview, is rather accurate. Bennett seems to think of history as a collection of random, meaningless, and basically unpredictable facts, which have to be twisted and distorted into an essay or a "story." In another sense, the passage suggests the way Bennett sees success and performance. Just as a clever historian (like Irwin) knows how to twist the meaningless of the universe into an entertaining story, an ambitious young student knows how to add polish and smoothness to his character, guaranteeing his admission to Oxford and his success in life. Rudge's response in the passage is refreshing precisely because he doesn't play along with the "game" of university admissions--he calls it like he sees it.

> Why are you so bold in argument and talking but when it actually comes to the point, when it's something that's actually happening, I mean now, you're so fucking careful?

Related Characters: Dakin (speaker), Irwin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99-100

Explanation and Analysis

In this uncomfortable scene, Dakin discovers the truth about Irwin. Irwin has implied that he went to study at Oxford as an undergraduate, when in reality, he just got his teaching diploma there. Irwin is visibly uncomfortable knowing that Dakin has found out his secret, and made further uncomfortable when Dakin propositions Irwin for sex. Dakin teases Irwin for his nervousness--Irwin has always been proud and reckless in his arguing, but in real life, he's extremely timid.

The passage reinforces the limits of Irwin's philosophy of education. Irwin emphasizes the importance of boldness and outward appearance. Yet beneath the surface--both in Irwin's style of argument and his lifestyle--there's not much depth or strength. Irwin pretends to be a successful Oxford man, but his success is a facade that Dakin eventually sees through. In the end, then, Irwin--both as a character and as a teacher--is no more attractive or successful than Hector.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1

The play opens with Irwin, a former teacher, now in his forties. He sits in a wheelchair. He is speaking to several members of the British Parliament, discussing a bill that would limit jury trials and "to a significant extent abolish the presumption of innocence" for those accused of a crime. This bill seems like an assault on liberty, but Irwin advises the legislators to argue that the bill actually makes people *more* free—it gives them the freedom to walk around without fear of crime, knowing that criminals will be punished. Irwin says that this type of argument reminds him of school.

We begin by seeing where Irwin ends up: giving morally questionable advice to Parliament, and sitting in a wheelchair. This is an image of frustrated expectations and past drama. Irwin later says that he once dreamed of making an academic breakthrough, but in this scene, he is using academic language to make a political argument. His physical disability is also a reminder of how random, unexpected events can change a person's life path.

We then flash back into the past, to a classroom at an all-boys school in northern England, some time in the 1980s. Hector, a history teacher, enters in a **motorcycle** helmet and leather motorcycling outfit. Eight sixth-formers—boys ages 17 and 18, who are in their last year of school before applying to universities—enter as well. They are Posner, Dakin, Scripps, Rudge, Lockwood, Akthar, Timms, and Crowther. They remove Hector's motorcycling gear and show it to the audience, naming each item in French as they do so. Then Hector begins teaching.

Hector is first introduced with a heroic ritual: the boys remove his motorcycle gear as if it is armor, and Hector is a warrior (the name Hector even references the famous warrior from Homer's Iliad*). As his motorcycle gear comes off, however, he is revealed to be just an older teacher. This same process happens on a larger scale over the course of the play, as the boys learn to see adults like Hector as flawed human beings. The ritual removal of clothes also has sexual undertones, which foreshadow Hector's actions on the motorcycle.*

Hector opens his class by congratulating the boys on a good performance on their A Levels (A Levels are exams taken at the end of high school in England that help determine admission to universities). Hector calls the exams "longed-for emblems of your conformity." Now that summer is over, he says, the boys are back to continue with their real education. Rudge asks why Hector is implying that A Levels aren't education. Hector responds that they're just "credentials" for the boys' CVs (resumes). His class, General Studies, is for the "bits in between" those credentials.

For Hector, education is not about the intellectual "conformity" that exams represent. A Levels are "credentials" because they are a type of knowledge that the educational system approves of. Hector, on the other hand, thinks that the boys should define their own standards. This opening scene introduces the boys as successful, intelligent students, with high hopes for their own futures.

The title "General Studies," Hector continues, is a euphemism. (Posner looks up the word and defines it for the audience: "substitution of mild or vague or roundabout expression for a harsh or direct one.") Hector says that, if he were in charge instead of the Headmaster, he would call them "A Waste of Time." He then quotes scholar and poet A. E. Housman in saying, "All knowledge is precious." Akthar correctly identifies Housman as the original speaker.

We witness some of Hector's main teaching techniques. He has the boys find the answers for themselves (by looking words up, for example) and encourages them to memorize quotes from literature. These are not results-driven methods, and they therefore represent an "old guard" approach in British education.

Timms asks if Housman was a "nancy," a pejorative slang word for a homosexual man. Hector tells him not to use that word, and hits him on the head with a book. Timms protests that Hector himself uses the word, and Hector says that his old age excuses this. Crowther says, jokingly, that Hector is not supposed to hit them, and that they could report him. Hector joins in on the joke, feigning despair. Dakin says that Hector should treat them with respect, now that all eight boys are up for scholarships to Oxford and Cambridge.

Homosexuality will be a theme throughout the play. Timms' comment suggests that it is still considered a socially odd and somewhat deviant practice in British culture (or at least at the school), and Hector's response shows that he wants the boys to move beyond knee-jerk negative reactions to homosexuality. But Hector also uses the word "nancy" himself, suggesting that he, too, has taken on some of society's prejudices.

Hector sits down, pretending to be shocked. He says that he thought "that silliness was finished with," and that the boys were going to aim for less prestigious institutions. He asks why they even want to go to Oxford and Cambridge. Lockwood says it's because they're old now—"tried and tested." Hector shoots back that it's actually only because *other* boys want to go there. He then bans any mention of Oxford and Cambridge from his lessons, hitting the boys again as he does so. He reminds them that there's a world beyond those schools.

We see here the tension inherent within Hector's educational philosophy: it is supposed to set the boys up for happier lives, but it may also limit them practically. Hector's encouraging the boys to go to less prestigious universities might mean that they earn less money or fame in life, but it's clear that Hector has different, less quantitative ideas about what success means.


Dakin notes, "you're hitting us again, sir." Hector says that "whatever I do in this room is a token of my trust…it is a pact. Bread eaten in secret." This is a reference to the Bible, Proverbs 9:17. He also quotes Deuteronomy, saying that the boys should "choose life" rather than Oxford and Cambridge. At his desk, he feigns despair again. Posner says, "Look up, My Lord," and then he and Timms launch into a scene taken from *King Lear*, just after Lear's death. Then the bell rings, and Hector jumps into the Lear scene, skipping ahead a few lines to say that he must go. Timms speaks a line of narration to the audience, clarifying that the hitting didn't hurt them. It was a joke. In fact, he says, the students "lapped it up."

The Bible quote suggests that Hector's classroom is a space outside of the regular educational system: class with him is an almost spiritual experience. Through the playful King Lear scene, we understand that the students are willing participants in this "pact." Hector's physical playfulness also has sexual undertones, but as Timms notes, the boys respond in a mostly joking and accepting manner. However, their playful protestations also show that they understand that Hector's sexual come-ons aren't socially acceptable.


Back in the present, the boys discuss the hitting. Rudge says that Hector hits the boys he likes (and that's not Rudge himself). Dakin says, "happily," that he's "black and blue." Scripps speaks an aside to the audience, saying that he's the only one of the boys who believes in God. It's gone out of style, he says, "but the big man [God] is glad."

Scripps's aside here is an example of the way that these commentaries to the audience can add information to the scene as it unfolds in real time. However, as in many cases, this one also jars us out of the moment—as Scripps changes the topic when he speaks. This is a way of dramatizing the fact that history both clarifies and fails to fully capture the events of life.

The scene changes to the staff room. The Headmaster asks Mrs. Lintott, the school's history teacher, what her plans are for "these Oxbridge boys. Your historians." She remarks that their A Level results were good, and the Headmaster agrees. Mrs. Lintott says that she expects to do "more of the same" to prepare them for their University entrance exams, but the Headmaster says that that hasn't worked before. He wants them to get into the best schools—Oxford and Cambridge—to raise the school's profile. "Factually tip-top as your boys always are," he says, "something more is required." Mrs. Lintott asks what he has in mind, and he says that it's something like "presentation." Mrs. Lintott scoffs at this, saying that "properly organized facts need no presentation." But the headmaster insists that the boys need more charm and "polish."

In this scene, we meet Mrs. Lintott—the only female character who speaks in the play—and witness the way that she is marginalized within the school. She is expected to do the grunt work of providing a solid foundation in history, but when it comes time for the last important push to get students into prestigious universities, she is passed over. We also witness the way that the Headmaster looks at education as a way to achieve social status. He wants that status not only on behalf of the boys, but even more so, for the school and himself. His worldview is at odds with Hector's, and this creates tension between them.

The Headmaster exits as Hector enters. Mrs. Lintott asks Hector if he himself tried to get into Cambridge, and Hector replies that it was actually Oxford—he wanted to go someplace "old." Mrs. Lintott says that her school, Durham, was old. Hector says that his school, Sheffield, wasn't, but he gained something from that: "I was confusing learning with the smell of cold stone. If I had gone to Oxford I'd probably never have worked out the difference." Mrs. Lintott says that her school had a good history program, and that she ate her first pizza there, and had other firsts, too—"but it's the pizza that stands out." She says that she wishes some of the boys wanted to go to Durham, but both teachers agree that they'll all keep pushing for Oxbridge (a combination of the words Oxford and Cambridge).

Hector's comment reveals that he was once in the same boat as his students, and believed that older universities were more desirable. He has since changed his mind, realizing that education is about more than the package it comes in, and that old things are not inherently worth celebrating. This second idea also relates to the way that we should think about history—if something is ancient, that doesn't mean that it's inherently worth remembering. Mrs. Lintott's comment about pizza is actually a subtle joke about unsatisfying sexual experiences in college. This is our first hint that she has been disappointed by men, and perhaps by men who thought that they were pleasing her. We also learn that both Hector and Mrs. Lintott did not achieve the level of success that the boys are hoping for, and this suggests that they have had to compromise and adjust their expectations over the course of their lives.

The scene changes as Scripps begins to narrate. He says that one day, he thought he saw a new schoolboy outside the headmaster's office. It turns out to be the new history teacher, Irwin, who is in his mid-twenties. The Headmaster enters and ushers Irwin into his study. He says that the boys are preparing for December examinations, but that Irwin must already know that, because he went to Cambridge. Irwin clarifies that it was Oxford. The Headmaster says that he himself went to Hull, because "this was the fifties. Change was in the air." Irwin mentions the poet Phillip Larkin, who was the librarian at Hull. The Headmaster says that Larkin was a "pitiless" librarian, and that artists "get away with murder."

In the meeting between the Headmaster and Irwin, we sense again that most adults in this play see university admission as a major facet of one's identity. Irwin gains credibility from his prestigious degree, while the Headmaster seems to want to justify his less prestigious credentials with an argument about being a free spirit. This suggests that one major purpose of a good university education is social standing later in life. As was suggested before, the Headmaster doesn't seem to care about art or education for their own sake, but only as means to an end.

Then the Headmaster comments that the boys are all smart—except for Rudge. Rudge plans to apply for admission into Christ Church college at Oxford, but the Headmaster says he doesn't have much chance of getting in. He tells Irwin that the boys "need polish. Edge. Your job." He says that there is an opening in the History department at the school, and that if Irwin can help the boys get scholarships, he can have the position. He offers three lessons per week. Irwin says this isn't enough. The Headmaster says that they'll only be able to find an hour more, given that Hector keeps a tight hold on General Studies. As he leaves, he encourages Irwin to grow a moustache to look older, and to keep better control of the classroom.

Rudge, an athlete who comes from a working class background, is underestimated throughout the play. This suggests the ways that big, societal structures like economic class affect daily life in invisible ways (Rudge isn't around to overhear this conversation, but it will probably affect the way that Irwin sees him). We also see that Irwin's and Hector's teaching styles come into direct conflict in the school schedule. There isn't room for both of them in the modern British education system.

The scene changes to Hector's classroom. He asks the boys, in French, where they would like to work today. The scene proceeds in French. Rudge says he wants to work in a garage, but the other boys protest. Dakin suggests "une maison de passe." Hector understands, but the other boys ask what that means. Posner translates: it's a brothel. Hector says, still in French, that they can work in a brothel—as long as all of the clients speak in the subjunctive or conditional verb tense. The boys begin to act out the scene in French. Posner plays a chambermaid named Simone, Dakin plays a client, and Timms plays a prostitute named Claudine. Crowther, Akthar, and Lockwood play supporting roles at the brothel (Rudge doesn't speak, and Scripps accompanies the scene on the piano). At one point, Posner takes off Dakin's pants, saying that he'll be more comfortable on the bed that way. The scene reaches a point where Timms and Dakin negotiate the price it will cost Dakin to touch the prostitute's breasts, when there is a knock at the door.

This scene suggests the ways that sexual and intellectual maturation will be linked throughout the play. With this brothel scene, the boys are acting childish and silly about both sex and school—yet Hector ties this exercise to learning the subjunctive. He considers silliness a part of education, too. We also see Posner enacting some suppressed desires in this class by taking off Dakin's pants (even if it's all part of the act). Again in this case, Hector's class is a space where normal social rules don't seem to apply. This means that Posner can act on his homosexual feelings in a way that wouldn't be allowed anywhere else.

Posner, still playing the chambermaid, says that it must be another client, and goes to open it. It is the Headmaster and Irwin. Hector, still speaking French, greets the Headmaster, who begins to respond in English that he hopes he isn't interrupting. Hector stops him, and says that he must continue in French. The Headmaster asks, in halting French, why Dakin has his pants off. The boys are paralyzed. Hector asks them to explain what's going on, and Dakin begins, "I am a man who…" but Hector stops him, saying that he's not just a man—he's a soldier. A wounded soldier. Hector says that they are pretending to be at a Belgian hospital during World War II. Dakin is wounded, and the other boys are playing medical personnel. Hector tells them to continue the scene, and they launch into a dramatic rendition of a wartime medical ward. Then Irwin cuts in to ask if Dakin might be shell-shocked. The classroom registers this as an intrusion into their normal routine.

When the Headmaster enters, Hector changes the scene from one in which boys are playing women and talking about sex to a more masculine scene— soldiers in wartime. This suggests that gender and sexuality are more fluid in Hector's classroom than they are in the outside world, and also that one situation would be seen as "appropriate," while the other might make the Headmaster concerned or angry. We also see that the Headmaster is in some ways not as smart as the boys are—Hector's teaching has worked, and the students all speak better French than their Headmaster does. Irwin, on the other hand, is able to participate in the class. This foreshadows the ways that his educational philosophy will begin to challenge Hector's.

Soon, the Headmaster interrupts to introduce Irwin as a new professor at the school. Then, in English, he tells the boys to stop their silliness. He asks if Hector is "aware that these pupils are Oxbridge candidates." Hector feigns surprise. The Headmaster says that Irwin will be offering them additional coaching, and begins to ask for some of Hector's lesson time for that purpose—but Hector flatly refuses. The Headmaster says that he is "thinking of the boys," and Hector says that he is, too. The Headmaster turns to Irwin and says, resigned to defeat, "fuck." Then the bell goes off. As class is ending, Rudge says to Hector that it's true that they don't have much time to prepare for their university entrance exams.

Though Irwin has begun to assert himself, Hector still retains a kind of power over him, and even over the Headmaster himself. Hector's vision of education still rules the day, and seemingly his students' hearts as well. Hector says he's acting in the boys' best interests, but Rudge's comment about exams reminds us that Hector may not just be thinking of the boys—his uncompromising vision of education may also be a way of adding meaning to his own life. If it is poetry and not wealth or social status that matters, then Hector's life has been a success.

Hector asks who is going home now, but no one responds. He says that he's sure he can give someone a lift, and asks Dakin if he's on "pillion duty" (a pillion is the second seat on a **motorcycle**). Dakin says that he's going into town. Crowther says that he's going for a run. Akthar has computer club. Posner offers to come, but Hector says never mind. Scripps says, "resignedly," that he'll come. Hector accepts this, and leaves. As he follows, Scripps says, "the things I do for Jesus," and flashes Dakin the middle finger. The boys discuss this. Posner says that he would go, but Hector never wants him to. Timms agrees. Dakin says that Posner and Timms "don't fit the bill," but that they should be grateful for that.

As we witness Hector asking the boys to ride with him on the motorcycle, (where, as we later learn, he will grope them), we begin to see him as a lonely and broken man. A moment ago he was banishing the Headmaster from his domain, but now, Hector has to cajole reluctant students to ride on a motorcycle with him in order to play out his sexual fantasies. We see that intellectual fulfillment doesn't necessarily correlate with sexual fulfillment, or with personal happiness.

The scene changes to Irwin's classroom, where he is passing back essays. He says that they are all "dull." Dakin protests that he "got all the points," and Irwin says that his essay isn't wrong, but it's still boring. Crowther says that this is the way they've been taught to do things, and Lockwood chimes in that "Mrs. Lintott discourages the dramatic." Timms complains that he can't read Irwin's handwriting, and Irwin says that it's the fault of his eyesight, and "we know what that's caused by." He's intimating that masturbating too much is said to make you go blind. Timms pretends to be scandalized by this, asking if this is "a coded reference to the mythical dangers of self-abuse" (another term for masturbation). Irwin says that it "might even be a joke." Timms asks if jokes will "be a feature," because "we need to know as it affects our mind-set."

Here, we see that Mrs. Lintott's educational philosophy has been based on the idea of truth and correctness. Irwin, on the other hand, doesn't value these things at all, and cares more that the boys' essays are interesting and surprising. Lockwood implies that Mrs. Lintott would call this approach "dramatic," suggesting that Irwin's idea of academia is more about entertainment than it is about rigor, thoughtfulness, or truth. The boys, and the audience, aren't yet sure how to respond to Irwin's philosophy, and Timms voices this confusion, saying that the boys don't know yet how they should be acting in this class.

Irwin pauses. Then he says that during the Reformation in the history of Christianity, "fourteen foreskins of Christ" were preserved, but people said that one church in Rome had the true specimen. Dakin says that Irwin shouldn't think they'll be shocked by this mention of foreskins. Crowther agrees: "some of us even have them." Lockwood says that Posner doesn't, because he's Jewish, and that this is "not racist," thought it is "race-related."

Irwin here links sex and academics. He does this to be shocking, and also to show his students the type of surprising argument that he hopes they will make. Yet the boys are more comfortable with the discussion than Irwin expects them to be. This suggests that their previous free-wheeling lessons with Hector have led them to be more comfortable with sexuality, and also able to see through the shock-value arguments that Irwin wants them to make.

Irwin looks at them again, and asks if any of them have been to Rome. They haven't. He reminds them that some of the students they're competing against will have traveled there and other places, and that they'll therefore be able to drop in specifics to keep their essays from being boring. This will please the examiners, who are used to reading the same thing over and over. In that context, Irwin says, "The fourteen foreskins of Christ will come as a real ray of sunshine." Irwin says that they should hate these other students, because they have such an advantage. Crowther asks why they're even bothering, and Irwin says that it's probably because they, or their parents, or their headmasters want it. Judging by the quality of these essays, however, Irwin suggests that they should go to a lesser school and "be happy." Then he says, after a long pause, that there is "another way." Timms asks if they should cheat. Irwin says, "possibly," and then the bell rings. As he leaves, Irwin tells Dakin that there isn't time for joking around.

Here, Irwin reminds the boys that their class status makes them less likely to get into Oxford and Cambridge. This is another reason why he doesn't believe in Mrs. Lintott's philosophy that well-presented facts are enough for the entrance exam. The game of admissions is not straightforward—class makes it unequal, and so the boys have to use strategy and cunning to get ahead. This view takes into account the way that social dynamics work in the real world. Hector's vision of education, on the other hand, is focused on a personal relationship with history and literature, and is more idealistic. Irwin's amoral strategies, then, are more useful in helping the boys achieve things in an unfair social system.

After the class, Timms calls Irwin a "wanker." Dakin says that all teachers have to "show you they're still in the game" by talking about things like foreskins. Scripps tells him to lighten up, as Irwin is "only five minutes older than we are." Then Dakin asks what happened with Hector on the **motorcycle**. Scripps says it was the same as usual, but that he managed to slip his bag between them. Scripps says he believes Hector thought that he had given Scripps an erection, when "in fact it was my Tudor Economics Documents, Volume Two." Posner approaches, and they stop talking.

Hector frames his own classes as preparation for the boys' old age. This gives the students the idea that Irwin's teaching methods might be more about youthful energy than sage wisdom,—but the boys also remind us about Hector's groping, and we remember that Hector, too, has lapses in wisdom. The play continues to offer mixed signals about which teacher's vision of education is superior.

Posner cuts in with some narration to the audience. He says that because he was "late growing up," he doesn't get to be a part of these conversations, and that they think he doesn't understand. In fact, he says he knows more about "them and their bodies" than they would expect. Scripps then adds his own narration. He says that "Dakin's navel…was small and hard like an unripe blackberry," while Posner's is softer, more like an orange. Scripps says that Posner envies Dakin's navel "and all the rest of him." At this point, Scripps says, Posner has not yet identified this envy as love. It is causing him "misery." Back in the present, Posner walks away, and Scripps, Dakin, and the other boys keep talking.

We learn that Posner is in love, and that this love (which defies societal norms) is making him miserable. Though he was late in maturing, however, Posner is not sexually stunted—he has a rich and active sexuality, but it's focused on men, and so makes him feel like a social outsider. Scripps's narration again offers a clarification that we couldn't get by merely watching the boys interact, showing how personal commentary can reveal hidden truths that might not be seen by outsiders or observers of history.

Dakin says that he sometimes wishes Hector would "just go for it." Scripps says that Hector *does* go for it, but Dakin says that he means off the motorcycle. Then Dakin says that Rudge is having sex. Rudge replies that he only has sex on Fridays, because he needs to play rugby and golf on the weekend. He then cuts in with narration to the audience, saying that no one thinks he can pass the exam, but "fuck 'em." Dakin says that he is seeing the Headmaster's secretary, Fiona. They haven't had sex yet, but Dakin hopes that they will do so on the study floor one of these days.

Dakin can see that Hector is repressed and frustrated, while Dakin himself is uninhibited and confident. This contrast is partly between adulthood and youth, as the play gives a sense that adulthood is full of frustrated expectations, while youth is full of possibility. We also witness again the way that sex serves as social capital—it gives Rudge and Dakin a special status. Meanwhile, Rudge points out he's still underestimated academically. We know that this is partly because Rudge is poorer than the other boys, showing again the way that class can invisibly affect events and interactions.

The scene shifts to the staff room. Mrs. Lintott remarks to Hector that Irwin seems "clever." Hector agrees: "depressingly so." Mrs. Lintott says that men are generally good at history, because they're so good at storytelling. Her ex-husband, for example, told a lot of stories. Hector muses that Dakin is "a good-looking boy, though somehow sad." Mrs. Lintott says, "you always think they're sad." She, however, thinks of Dakin as "cunt-struck." Hector is taken aback by this. Mrs. Lintott says that she thought he would like that description, as "it's a compound adjective," which Hector likes. Hector brings the conversation back to Dakin, saying that he's clever. Mrs. Lintott claims responsibility for that. Hector says, "you give them an education. I give them the wherewithal to resist it." Mrs. Lintott says that Hector is better than most teachers at giving his students a sense of discovery.

Here, Mrs. Lintott suggests for the first time that the way people write history has to do with their gender. Her comment suggests that Irwin's educational philosophy is incomplete, because it doesn't acknowledge the way that women would tell the story. She also suggests that Hector is telling himself a limited story about Dakin in the present, just as Irwin is telling a limited story about the past. Hector's comment about how he helps the boys resist education, however, suggests that Mrs. Lintott's view is also limited, this time by the norms of the educational system. Their conversation again brings up the theme of how hard it is to pin down one single truth.

The scene changes to Irwin's classroom. He says that the boys' essays have come to a "less-than-startling" conclusion that poets have a generally bad view of World War I, and that "the origins of the Second War lie in the unsatisfactory outcome of the First." Timms agrees with this assessment, and the others nod, too. Irwin says that the secondary institutions will welcome this interpretation, but that it will put Oxford fellows to sleep. Scripps insists that it's "true," and Irwin asks what truth has to do with anything.

The fact that the boys all have the same view about World War I suggests that Irwin may be right that their ideas are "dull." They haven't come to diverse, interesting conclusions: they've all conformed to the same one. They believe that this one answer is "true," but Irwin questions that. As we have come to see throughout the play, there usually isn't just one definition of truth—especially if one wants to be unique or entertaining.

Irwin offers an alternate interpretation, suggesting that Britain is partially responsible for the war, and that they don't like to remember this fact because of the huge death toll. The commemorations of the war, he says, are a way of forgetting Britain's culpability. He suggests that the British general Douglas Haig, who is generally considered to have led too many British soldiers to their death at the battle of Passchendaele, might actually have been an effective warrior. He argues that, apart from their poems, many of the poets seem to have had mixed or even positive feelings about the war.

Irwin suggests that popular versions of history are partly a way of making ourselves feel better about the past. The British wants to remember World War I in a certain way so that they don't have to face more complicated and difficult emotions or learn from past mistakes. On another level, the narrative asides throughout the play have been making a similar point—that the explanation that seems obvious on the surface might actually fail to capture the full truth of any given time or event.

Irwin says that poetry can "add flavor" to an essay. Dakin likens this to the foreskins, and Irwin ignores him. Irwin suggests that they look to a Kipling poem about the war instead of the Wilfred Owen. Owen's poetry expresses horror about the war, but Kipling at first supported it, then wrote grief-stricken poetry after his son was killed in action. Irwin begins to summarize Kipling, saying, "in other words…" but Timms cuts in and says that in the case of a work of art, "there are no other words." Lockwood agrees, and Irwin is puzzled. Then Rudge cuts in and asks what the upshot of all this is. Irwin says that Rudge shouldn't just parrot what the teacher says. But, he also tells Rudge to write down Irwin's own idea that the First World War was a "mistake. It was not a tragedy."

Up until this point, Irwin's educational philosophy seemed valid (in this scene at least)—but when he begins to trivialize literature, the sentiment in the classroom swings back to Hector's side. Rudge wants a simple explanation of what's happening: essentially, how he should weigh Irwin's philosophy against Hector's. Irwin initially says that there are no simple answers—a view that the play supports—but then he tells Rudge to write down his own supposedly controversial viewpoint, reminding us that Irwin's way of looking at history is actually rather formulaic.

Then Irwin tells Scripps that "truth is no more at issue in an examination than thirst at a wine-tasting or fashion at a striptease." Dakin asks if he really believes that, or if he's just trying to provoke them to question their assumptions. Scripps and Lockwood argue that "art wins in the end," and then the bell rings. Scripps begins to quote a poem by Philip Larkin that discusses the way World War I stripped Britons of their innocence. Lockwood, Akthar, Posner, and Timms all chime in with lines of the poem as they get ready to leave the classroom. Irwin asks, confused, how they all know this poem. Then he exits.

Irwin re-iterates that truth is not the central issue on an exam—the examiners are actually looking to be entertained and intrigued, as if they are at a wine-tasting or a striptease. In this second metaphor, Irwin once again links sex and academics—he is being purposefully provocative, just as he wants the boys to be. The boys reject Irwin's thoughts about World War I by quoting some lines of poetry, suggesting that literature is able to encapsulate emotions of the time that are lost in Irwin's shallower re-telling.

Still in the classroom, Scripps and Dakin discuss Fiona. Dakin uses a metaphor of World War I to explain his sexual conquests. He says that Fiona is the "Western Front," which was the area Germany invaded during World War I. The night before, Dakin says, he had advanced as far as "the actual place," but ultimately "not onto it and certainly not into it." Fiona stopped him at "23.00 hours." He says that previously, "her tits…fell after a prolonged campaign," and that he can now "access" them whenever he wants. Scripps tells him that's enough, and Dakin says that at least he's gotten farther with Fiona than the Headmaster, Felix, has. He "chases her round the desk hoping to cop a feel." Posner, who has been lingering in the classroom, too, cuts in that the war metaphor isn't perfect, because Fiona is in the midst of a "planned withdrawal." Presumably, she's eventually going to let Dakin have sex with her, so he's not overwhelming her with force. "You're just negotiating over the pace of the occupation," Posner says. Scripps tells Dakin, "just let us know when you get to Berlin."

Irwin just linked sex and history, and here Dakin does the same thing, as he compares his sexual exploits with Fiona to a conquest in World War I. Irwin's metaphor reminded us that sex can be about teasing provocation, but Dakin's words suggest that it is also about power. This is further emphasized by the fact that the Headmaster, who has power over Fiona as her employer, abuses that power to try to grope her at work. This metaphor reduces both history and sex to power relationships rather than emotional human relationships. Posner's comment seems to come from a place of jealousy and sadness, as he recognizes the inevitability of Fiona's seduction, and doesn't want to hear more about Dakin's love life.

Dakin then says that he's beginning to like Irwin more, though Irwin still doesn't like him. Posner begins to sing a song, "Bewitched," while Scripps plays the piano. The other boys come back into the classroom from their break. The scene changes to Hector's General studies class. Hector asks Posner to recite a poem, and Timms groans that he doesn't understand poetry. Hector says that his job for now is just to learn it—he'll understand it later. It's meant to be an antidote for future unhappiness and troubles—"we're making your deathbeds here, boys."

Hector's reminder that poetry is an antidote for unhappiness reveals more about his educational philosophy. He believes that education is not necessarily about mastery, success, or definable achievements. Life will be full of difficulty, and Hector thinks that education is there to give one the tools to deal with that suffering—not to try and avoid suffering altogether. Irwin's teaching is more realistic than Hector's in terms of immediate results, but Hector's somewhat cynical view of life is also practical in its own way.

Someone knocks at the **locked door** to the classroom. Hector begins quoting from a scene in *Hamlet* in which he orders that the door be locked after the queen is poisoned. Someone tries to open the door, but can't. Hector asks the boys to name knocks at the door in literature, and Akthar, Posner, and Scripps name instances from Coleridge's poetry, a Mozart opera, and the Bible. Timms looks outside, and says that the knocker was Irwin, but that he's gone now. Hector muses about other knocks, from death, love, and opportunity.

The locked door of Hector's classroom represents the fact that his General Studies classes happen outside of the regular educational system. The norms and ideas of this system are powerful, and they're always trying to intrude into Hector's domain. Here, Irwin symbolizes that more mainstream educational philosophy. Hector uses literature as a buffer against the world, even in a literal way—he doesn't answer the knock, but instead quotes from works of literature about knocks at the door.

Then Hector moves on to a game that they play in class. The boys challenge him to name a reference to a work of literature or art, and if he can name it, they have to put fifty pence into a tin. Timms and Lockwood begin a scene while Scripps plays the piano (they say that they have to smoke while they do it). Hector knows the reference—it's from a famous movie—so Timms and Lockwood pay up. Then they unlock the door, and Hector and the boys exit. Only Rudge stays behind in the classroom to work.

This is one of Hector's teaching techniques—to play silly games in order to keep the boys from being too self-serious about their education. The fact that he includes movies suggests that he is not drawn to literature because some external authority has deemed it important. He wants the boys to choose what's important for themselves, and this includes movies and pop culture.

Mrs. Lintott enters and sees Rudge. She asks him how the class is getting along with Irwin. Rudge says it makes him miss her lessons, and she is flattered. He says that Irwin's classes are "free-range…you've force-fed us the facts; now we're in the process of running around acquiring flavor." Mrs. Lintott asks if that's how Irwin talks about it, and Rudge says he came up with the metaphor himself. He says he's about to go home to watch some movies that Irwin has recommended, the *Carry On* films. Mrs. Lintott asks if Irwin likes these movies, and Rudge says that he probably doesn't. Irwin has argued that they acquire some of the "permanence of art" simply by staying popular over time. Rudge calls Irwin's lessons "cutting-edge."

Rudge is an astute observer, despite what the others think of him. He sees that Irwin wants them to add "flavor" to their "facts," and suggests that this is a somewhat shallow pursuit. He also understands, however, that the facts were "force-fed" in the first place, and the boys weren't allowed to discover them on their own. His comparison of the boys to chickens being raised for food suggests the "production line" aspect of the educational system, especially as this school seems so concerned with the end result of getting into Oxford or Cambridge.

The scene changes to Irwin's classroom. Timms asks Irwin where he lives, and he gives a vague response. Akthar and Dakin press him, wondering if he has a life outside of teaching. Irwin changes the subject back to their essays—he says they're "dreary" again. He reminds them that if they get a question about Stalin, they shouldn't follow the crowd and condemn him—they should find a way to defend him. Irwin declares that, "History nowadays is not a matter of conviction. It's a performance. It's entertainment." Rudge says that he gets it—Irwin wants them to find "an angle."

We already suspect that Hector is lonely, and now the boys wonder whether Irwin is too. Adults in this play have made education their life, but the boys think this fact might make their personal lives less satisfying. Irwin also says here that history is not about discovering how you really feel—it's about putting on a show. Unlike Hector, Irwin doesn't see school as a place for personal exploration.

Scripps steps out to deliver narration to the audience. He says that Irwin eventually became well known as a historian who always took an unconventional point of view. Scripps says that his method was, however, "as formal in its way as the disciplines of the medieval schoolmen." There was a formula to it.

Scripps points out that Irwin's teaching method isn't as "free-range" as he pretends it is. It simply involves identifying the common stance, and then taking the opposite position—but this doesn't actually involve any original thinking.

Back in the present, Irwin says that the boys should take exam questions about things they don't know and answer using knowledge that they *do* have, like answering a question about Rembrandt with knowledge about Ingres. Rudge asks if Ingres was an "old master," and this leads Timms to quote a poem. Irwin asks if they learned that poem with Hector, and Timms evades the question. Then Irwin asks why Hector works behind a **locked door** during his classes. The boys pretend to be surprised to hear this.

Irwin believes that the exam is about showing off, not about historical facts, so you don't have to actually know an answer in order to succeed. The fact that the boys pretend to be surprised about the locked door shows that they have at least partly bought into Hector's pact—they too want to keep his classes separate from the outside world. This suggests that they find value in Hector's anti-system mentality.

Irwin asks whether Hector has a "programme" to his teaching, and Akthar and Timms say that it's about the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Irwin says that this used to be called "wider reading." Lockwood says that it can actually sometimes be "narrower reading," because Hector thinks that it's okay to know any book, as long as you know it well. Crowther adds that what Hector teaches also has to pertain to "the heart." Lockwood agrees, and says, "it's higher than your stuff, sir. Nobler." Posner adds that it's not as "useful," because it's not "focused." Timms and Akthar agree that Hector is "blurred" in comparison with Irwin.

The boys half-jokingly express the central differences between Hector and Irwin's teaching styles. Lockwood's joking comment that Hector is "nobler" has a grain of truth to it. Hector wouldn't compare academics to a strip-tease, and his class does feel somewhat sacred (earlier on, he even uses a Bible passage to describe it). Yet this more high-minded vision of academics isn't as immediately "useful," and for young people trying to make their way in the world, that's an important aspect of education too.

Akthar changes the subject, commenting that Irwin is very young. Lockwood asks whether teaching at the school is "just a hiccup between the end of university and the beginning of life," and Dakin asks whether Irwin likes the poet Auden. He says that Hector does, and so they hear a lot about him. He was a teacher for a time, too. Dakin asks whether Auden would have been more like Irwin, or more like Hector, and Irwin says he doesn't know. Dakin posits that he might have been more like Hector. He says that "he snogged his pupils. Auden, sir. Not Mr. Hector." Dakin then quotes a romantic line of poetry that Auden wrote about a student.

Auden, Hector, and Irwin are all teachers, and we know that Auden and Hector were both sexually attracted to their students, meaning that school and other parts of life became intertwined for them. The boys want to know whether Irwin, too, has a life that is wrapped up in school and his career. Lockwood and Akthar suggest that this teaching job isn't a phase of Irwin's "real" life." This relates to the idea that the boys have lives full of possibility outside of school, while the teachers have given up some of those hopes and remain trapped in academics.

Irwin asks them whether they could answer an exam question about Auden, and they all protest. Timms says that Hector's stuff is "not meant for the exam," but rather "it's to make us more rounded human beings." Irwin says that they must use all the knowledge they have on the test, and Akthar replies that this would be "a betrayal of trust." Posner clarifies to Irwin that the boys are just joking. Then Lockwood quotes another line of poetry, one that Irwin doesn't know, and Lockwood says that it's by female poet Stevie Smith. Irwin says the line could be perfect to end an essay on post-imperial decline, and asks, "how much more stuff like that have you got up your sleeves?" The bell goes off. Lockwood says they've got lots more, and Posner and Scripps act out a scene from the 1945 film *Brief Encounter*. Irwin recognizes it, and says that the lesson has been a "waste of time." Dakin says that this is just like Hector's lessons. Irwin says that's true, "but he's not trying to get you through an exam."

The boys show that they have at least partly bought in to Hector's ideas about how education should make them better people. They also clearly feel the "sacred" aspect of his classes, as they naturally feel that the things he teaches them are not meant to be deployed on an exam. But Posner reminds us that the boys still care about success, and would be willing to betray Hector's pact in order to get ahead. Before, when the boys quoted poetry in Irwin's class, it was to fight against Irwin's idea about World War I and to tell a more emotionally nuanced story about the past. Here, however, poetry becomes one more piece in Irwin's examination game. His educational philosophy is gaining ground over Hector's as the exam approaches.

The scene changes to the staff room. Mrs. Lintott asks Irwin whether he's earned a nickname from the boys. He says he doesn't think so. Mrs. Lintott says that "a nickname is an achievement," and Irwin comments that Hector doesn't have one. Mrs. Lintott says that "Hector" is it—his real name is Douglas, but the only person to call him that is "his somewhat unexpected wife." Irwin says that Posner came into his classroom yesterday with a problem. The following scene layers the staff room conversation with the conversation in Irwin's classroom. Posner tells Irwin that he thinks he is homosexual, and that he is in love with Dakin. Irwin tells Mrs. Lintott that he "sympathized, though not so much as to suggest I might be in the same boat." Mrs. Lintott asks if he means the same boat with Dakin, and Irwin says, "with anybody." Mrs. Lintott says this was a good idea. It's hard for boys to understand that teachers are human, she says, and hard for teachers "not to try and tell them."

This conversation touches on a few relationships that are unrequited or one-sided. One is Hector's relationship with his "unexpected" wife (Mrs. Lintott apparently knows that Hector is attracted to men, and that he nonetheless remains married to a woman). Another is Posner's unrequited love for Dakin. Finally, the teachers at the school have a one-sided relationship with their students, who don't really see them as full people. The presence of all of these half-formed relationships in the play suggests that loneliness creeps up on you as you get older. Mrs. Lintott, Hector, and even Irwin have lives that are dominated by work and seem devoid of fulfilling love. Posner, though still young and hopeful, seems headed in that direction, too.

Posner asks Irwin whether this is a phase, and says, "some of the literature says it will pass." Irwin, either in an aside or to Mrs. Lintott in the staff room, says that he wanted to tell Posner that literature (i.e. books and poetry) says otherwise. Posner says that he's not sure whether he wants his feelings to pass, but he knows he wants to get into Cambridge. He believes this might make Dakin love him—or it might make him care less. Then he gives this assessment of his life: "I'm a Jew. I'm small. I'm a homosexual. I live in Sheffield. I'm fucked." Mrs. Lintott asks whether they talked about anything else, and Irwin says no. She exits.

Posner has been looking for clear answers about his sexuality, and he is drawn to the idea that success (in the form of Oxbridge) might be a magic bullet to solve all of his problems. Posner is still hopeful about his future, but Irwin and the audience know that university admissions won't solve his heartache. Irwin even points out that in this case, Posner would do better to look to literature for solace—the course Hector has been suggesting all along. This suggests that Hector is right to think that his teaching will make the boys happier than Irwin's emphasis on exams will.

Irwin, back in the scene with Posner, asks what the boys do in Hector's lessons. Posner says "nothing," and adds, "you shouldn't ask me that, sir." Irwin calls it a "quid pro quo"—Posner confided in him, and now he's confiding in Posner. Posner says that he has to go. Irwin persists, asking Posner whether the boys learn poetry on their own. Posner says that Hector makes you want to learn, and Irwin asks how. Posner says that it's "a conspiracy…against the world," then tells Irwin that he hates this interrogation, and wants to go. Irwin asks if the conspiracy aspect is what makes Hector work behind a **locked door**. Posner says that it's a way of making sure that Hector's classes are apart from the world, "not part of the system."

Irwin lies to Mrs. Lintott, which suggests that he is embarrassed that he pushed Posner to tell him more about Hector. Irwin's interest indicates that he wishes he shared the same special relationship with the students that Hector does—though the audience, of course, knows that this special relationship has a sexual side that Irwin should not want to emulate. Irwin in this scene seems desperate for both status as a teacher and friendship with the boys, suggesting that his bravado in class covers up his uncertainty and insecurity.

Irwin asks why Posner came to *him* about Dakin, and not to Hector. Posner says that he wanted "advice" and not a quote from literature. Hector thinks that literature is "everything," but Posner says, "it isn't, though, is it, sir?" Scripps cuts in with a narrative aside to the audience. He says that what Posner didn't say is that he had seen Irwin looking at Dakin, too. Scripps says of Posner, "basically he just wanted company." Irwin tells Posner that the feelings will "pass." Posner agrees. As a parting shot, Irwin tells Posner that he should stop being so agreeable, and "acquire the habit of contradiction." Posner says "yes, sir. No, sir." Scripps then accompanies Posner on the piano while he sings the last verse of a hymn.

The fact that Irwin is also suppressing his homosexual attraction for Dakin suggests that he, like Hector and Posner, is lonely. Yet Irwin doesn't try to make Posner feel less alone. Instead, he tries to place himself apart from Posner. He suggests that Posner, unlike Irwin, has not learned to contradict society's commonly held ideas—but the scene as a whole shows that Irwin's bold academic philosophies have not helped him avoid loneliness and suffering. He probably insults Posner as an ineffective way of making himself feel better.

The scene changes. Dakin asks Scripps what he does to practice his religion, and Scripps says that he prays and goes to church, but that mostly "it's what you don't do." Dakin asks if he means that he doesn't "wank" (masturbate). Scripps doesn't, but says that it's not forever. Dakin teases him: "just tell me on the big day and I'll stand well back." Scripps says that he feels that he has to practice religion now so that it's not something he has to return to later in life. He says that his parents hate it. He also says that there are things he still doesn't understand about religion—like the fact that you should love God just because he loves you. He compares him to "Hector minus the **motorbike**" and says that "God should get real."

Scripps, like Posner, is an outsider—he is the only one of the boys who believes in God. But Scripps is able to explore his own mind and make unconventional choices about his sexuality while still relating to others socially. He is thus an example of a well-adjusted person—one of the few in the play. He draws from Irwin's teaching methods, as we see in his irreverent description of God, but he also benefits from Hector's beliefs about developing yourself without concern for social convention.

Dakin says that this is a good line of argument for Cambridge interviews. Scripps says he won't use it—it's private. Dakin says, "fuck private." Scripps asks Dakin to test him on T.S. Eliot, and recites an Eliot poem about a painting by the artist Piero della Francesca. Dakin comments that "the more you read, though, the more you see that literature is actually about losers…all literature is consolation." Scripps protests that some literature is about joy, and Dakin responds that it's only written when good things are over, and it's "lowering." Scripps asks if he really means it, or he's trying out some "original thoughts" for the exam. Dakin says he isn't, but Scripps says it's the kind of thing that Irwin would say. Dakin says it was Irwin who opened him up to this way of thinking—"I didn't know you were allowed to call art and literature into question." He says that the idea comes partly from the philosopher Nietzsche. He mispronounces the name, and Scripps corrects him. Dakin is horrified, realizing that Irwin listened to him talk about Nietzsche without correcting him.

Scripps says that he doesn't want to use his "private" thoughts on the exam, and this further suggests that he has internalized some of Hector's teachings. His beliefs about religion are for his own growth, not for any external validation. Dakin, on the other hand, is beginning to question Hector's teachings even as he also criticizes Irwin. His comments about literature suggest that Dakin has come to see suffering as a failure, not as a fact of life. He seems to think that if one is not a "loser," then literature becomes unnecessary. Dakin and Scripps are thus both beginning to form their own ideas about how they should use Hector's and Irwin's teaching to live their lives. They are maturing intellectually and growing into adulthood.

The scene changes to an unidentified location. Irwin and Hector are mid-conversation. Irwin says that he's gathered that the boys know a lot of information from Hector's class, but that they seem to think that they shouldn't use it on the university examinations. Hector says that's not surprising, because he openly calls exams the "enemy of education" (though he adds, "which is not to say that I don't regard education as the enemy of education, too"). Still, he says that he'll talk to them about it. Irwin thanks him, and says that he actually sympathizes with Hector's view of exams, but that the "gobbets" the boys have learned with Hector "might just tip the balance."

Hector is here finally willing to compromise his principles in order to promote the boys' success—and Irwin shows that he understands Hector's point of view. Irwin actually feels similarly that exams aren't true education, but he wants the boys to use whatever they can to pass them anyway. Bennett never draws a sharp line or takes a strong moralizing tone about these teachers' two opposing viewpoints. Indeed, one of his major arguments is that we shouldn't accept simplistic explanations of truth, especially about big questions like the purpose of education.

Hector immediately objects to this characterization, saying, "codes, spells, runes—call them what you like, but do not call them *gobbets*." Irwin protests that he was only thinking that the ideas might be useful, and Hector objects to this, too, saying that the poems and movie scenes belong in the realm of the heart, and are "not to be defiled by being trotted out to order." Irwin asks why they're learning them, then, and says that education isn't just for old age—"the exam is next month." But Hector reminds Irwin that after the exam, life will go on.

Even while this scene blurs the line between Hector and Irwin in some ways, Hector still feels forcefully about his point of view. It is when Irwin trivializes literature that Hector and the boys disagree with him most strongly, because this shows that his vision of education is emotionally shallow. Irwin and Hector also disagree about the purpose of education in the long or short term. Hector is thinking about the boys' whole lives, while Irwin is thinking about "next month." This is partly due to their different ages, as Hector understands more about how much suffering life entails, while Irwin, like the boys, still believes in the power of success to make one happy.

The scene changes again. The Headmaster asks Irwin how the boys are doing, and Irwin says he thinks they're doing well. The Headmaster demands more certainty, and Irwin says that there's always luck involved. The Headmaster is taken aback by this, and says that he doesn't want to repeat the failures of previous years. Irwin comments that the boys might benefit from using more of Hector's knowledge, and the Headmaster says that they're not likely to do that. The Headmaster can't see the point of knowing reams of poetry by heart, and doesn't think that's what the examiners will be looking for.

The Headmaster is even more extreme than Irwin is in his view that education should be useful, which serves to make us more sympathetic to Irwin as a character. Even though he's also hedging his bets, in discussing the "randomness" of the exams Irwin clearly understands that life is shaped largely by random events. This is one of the lessons that he is trying to teach the boys in his history classes, and one that the play upholds as a valuable lesson.

Mrs. Lintott enters, and the Headmaster exits. She tells Irwin that if he remains a teacher, he'll learn that Headmasters are often the enemy of a good school culture. She tells him that Hector's aim is to be a memorable teacher, and that Irwin should forgive him if he oversteps. Changing the subject, she asks whether Dakin is the best student, and Irwin says he's the "canniest." Mrs. Lintott says he's the best looking. She says that Dakin certainly knows more than Irwin does, at least about the school, because he's seeing Fiona, the Headmaster's secretary. Irwin says that he didn't know that. Mrs. Lintott says that he should, and she suspects that Posner does.

Mrs. Lintott (like Scripps earlier) seems to suspect that Irwin might have feelings for Dakin. She has already cautioned Hector against being seduced by Dakin, and now she subtly tells Irwin the same thing. Mrs. Lintott is thus operating behind the scenes to help protect two major male characters in the play. She is astute enough to sense their attraction to their students, and her response is to try to minimize the damage that they might suffer at the school as a result. Mrs. Lintott will later argue that women operate behind the scenes of history, and here, she does just that.

Scripps begins to narrate. He says that halfway through the school term, the Headmaster calls Hector into his office. There, he asks Hector why he teaches "behind **locked doors**," and Hector says it's because he doesn't want to be disturbed. "Teaching?" the Headmaster asks pointedly. He continues that his wife works at a charity shop in town, and that lately she has been looking out the window to see a man driving a **motorcycle** with a boy riding behind, and the "man…fiddling." She wrote down the license plate number. Now, the Headmaster knows that it was Hector. The Headmaster says that he's not going to do anything for the time being, but that Hector should plan to retire early, at the end of the term.

Immediately after Mrs. Lintott tries to caution Irwin against any sexual affair with the students, an off-stage female character also changes the course of history. This non-speaking female character is a major force in the story, further dramatizing the way that women are often left out of a narrative, even though they may have a large influence. The Headmaster's discovery of the incident happens by coincidence, again illustrating Bennett's argument that history does not progress linearly and predictably, but rather through a series of random, unpredictable events.

Hector doesn't immediately answer. Then he quotes a line of A.E. Housman's poetry: "The tree of man was never quiet." The Headmaster says that it's "no time for poetry," and Hector responds, "I would have thought it was just the time." The Headmaster asks Hector why he didn't stop to think. Hector quotes another poem: "to think that two and two are four / And never five nor three / The heart of man has long been sore / And long 'tis like to be."

Hector here enacts his own educational philosophy—in his hour of need and suffering, he looks to literature. Hector's quotes are only vaguely related to the topic at hand, and his response also feels inadequate, given the seriousness of the Headmaster's accusations. This suggests that Hector's philosophy is not always well-suited to the practical matters in life.

The Headmaster asks if Hector's wife knows about this, and Hector says he's not sure, but he doesn't think she'd be "interested." Hector says that his wife helps out at the charity shop, too, and that he doesn't understand how women think. The Headmaster moves on to a new topic, saying that this unfortunate circumstance leads him to ask that Hector share his lessons with Irwin for the remainder of the term. He says that he has always considered Hector's lessons to be more about some vision of culture than about the boys' best interests, and that sharing a lesson will also help remedy that. He reminds Hector that he would rather force an early retirement than fire him. As Hector leaves, he starts to say that "nothing happened." The Headmaster says it wasn't nothing. Hector begins to explain himself: "The transmission of knowledge is in itself an erotic act. In the Renaissance…" but the Headmaster counters, "Fuck the renaissance," and "all the other shrunken violets you people line up. This is a school and it isn't normal."

Hector's estranged marriage shows us again that his adult life is marked by failure and frustrated expectations. In this scene, the Headmaster is clearly pre-occupied with social convention and practical matters, while Hector, on the other hand, has learned to blind himself to social conventions. This means that the Headmaster sees Hector's sexual acts as unusual and deviant, while Hector sees them in the context of self-actualization and the quest for knowledge. This incident shows that Hector's educational and life philosophies aren't fully adequate for confronting life's challenges—he lacks practical social intelligence, and this leads him to act in destructive ways.

The scene changes to Hector's classroom. Hector sits at his desk wearing his **motorcycle** clothes, and Posner enters. Hector asks if Dakin is coming too, and Posner says he's busy going over old exam questions with Irwin. Hector compares this to "pornography," and asks Posner what he's learned to recite this week. Posner says he has learned Thomas Hardy's "Drummer Hodge." He recites it.

Again Hector links sex and learning, saying that Irwin's flashy intellectualism is like pornography. The fact that Posner is coming in after hours to work on poetry illustrates the deeper way that Hector's educational philosophy appeals to the boys. Posner sacrifices his time to come learn poetry with Hector.

The poem is about an army drummer who dies, and is buried in a foreign land. Hector and Posner discuss it. Hector points out that the dead soldier has a name and a known occupation—he is "Drummer Hodge." In previous wars, he would have been an unknown soldier in a mass grave. Posner asks how old Hardy is. At first Hector thinks he's asking how old the drummer is, and says that he would have been younger than Posner himself. Then Posner clarifies, and Hector says that the poet Thomas Hardy was about sixty when he wrote the poem—Hector's own age.

Posner is a stand-in for Drummer Hodge in this conversation, and Hector for the poet Thomas Hardy. Posner is a boy navigating his own difficulties in life, while Hector is a skilled interpreter of literature, giving Posner some guiding principles to live by. In this scene we see some ways that Hector can effectively apply his educational philosophy to real life, as he uses poetry to relate to Posner in a more nuanced and comforting way than Irwin could. At the same time, there is some sexual tension in this scene, and the subtext of both men discussing their frustrated desires.

Hector goes on to say that Hardy had a "saddish" life. He also notes that Hardy tends to use compound adjectives by putting the prefix "un" in front of a noun or verb. In this case, Hardy describes the drummer's body as "uncoffined." Hector gives other examples: "Un-kissed. Un-rejoicing. Un-confessed. Un-embraced." He says that this gives the sense of "being out of it," and holding back. Posner says that he got that sense from the poem. Then Hector says, "the best moments in reading are when you come across something — a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things — which you had thought special and particular to you." He says that this feels like a companionship with someone you have never met, and "it is as if a hand has come out and taken yours."

Here, Hector makes one of the play's clearest statements about frustration and failure, as he describes a sense of holding back and being a social outsider. Posner and Hector share this feeling, largely because of their shared homosexual desires. Hector here offers Posner advice about how to deal with it: through reading. Though we have just seen the limitations of Hector's educational philosophy in his confrontation with the Headmaster, this scene reminds us that he is right that there is much wisdom to be gained from literature. Posner, the student who most feels himself to be a social outsider, can find comfort in books.

There is a moment in which it seems that Hector might grab Posner's hand, or place his hand on Posner's knee. But nothing happens. Hector asks Posner to speak the last stanza again, and Posner does. Then Dakin enters wearing a helmet. Hector asks why he's wearing that, and Dakin responds that it's Wednesday, so he's riding home with Hector on the **motorcycle**. Hector says that he won't be doing that today. Hector exits, and Dakin and Posner remain behind, "wondering."

Hector's teaching style allows him to find a strong emotional connection with Posner. That connection verges on the sexual, but Hector holds back, now putting up barriers between himself and his students. This moment of restraint shows that true maturity involves a balance among competing desires: intellectual fulfillment, social connection, sexual satisfaction, and societal acceptance. It is only now that he has been caught, however, that Hector is learning the sexual aspect of that maturity.

ACT 2

Act two opens with Irwin, about five years after the end of act one, sitting in a wheelchair and talking to a camera. He is doing a television piece on King Henry VIII, who dissolved Catholic monasteries during his reign in the 1500s. Irwin narrates a shot of the latrine at one of these monasteries. He laments that, for many tourists, "the monastic life only comes alive when contemplating its toilet arrangements." Then the Director comes out to tell him that he sounds a bit too "schoolmasterly." They begin the narration again. Irwin describes the many other aspects monastic life that a visitor might conceivably enjoy learning about, but concludes, "God is dead. Shit lives." He says that scraps of fabric, once used as toilet paper, now inhabit the abbey museum.

At the beginning of the second act, we see that Irwin's emphasis on performance has led him to become an academic entertainer. This is probably a lucrative career, and one that gives Irwin social accolades—but the downside is that he has to make his analysis less deep (less "schoolmasterly") than he might otherwise want to do. Irwin's speech about the toilet touches on the same theme. In order to make history accessible and TV-friendly, he has to focus on the sensational or provocative elements of it.

Irwin goes on to say that these "rags are hallowed…by time." They have become "sanitised by the years and sanctified, too." He ends the segment by saying that the "cults" of today are no more rational than the ones that came before. He stumbles a bit as he finishes, and apologizes to the Director, who says this is unusual for Irwin, and suggests that they take a break. Irwin wheels himself back to a Man who has been watching, and asks if all this sounds familiar. He says that it is "meretricious, of course, but that's nothing new." The Man asks what meretricious means, and Irwin says that it means "eye-catching, showy; false."

We have already encountered the idea that age alone is not enough to make something important. Hector expressed this idea about Oxbridge, and Irwin here suggests that many people who study history also focus on old things just because *they're old. At this point, Irwin seems to have become disillusioned by his own educational philosophy: he tells the Man (Posner, as we will see later) that it is "showy" and "false."*

The Man says that Irwin was a "good teacher," and Irwin replies that meretricious people are often effective teachers, especially on TV. He says that his disability also makes him come off as more sincere. Then he says to the Man, "I hope they're paying you well," and asks who gave him the idea. The Man says that he has a "counsellor," or a psychiatrist, who thought that this project would help him. Irwin asks, "What happened at Oxford?" and the Man says that he actually went to Cambridge, but "it didn't work out." He says he spent all his energy trying to get in, and "I thought I'd got somewhere, then I found I had to go on."

Irwin has always been skilled at self-presentation—he used that skill to help the boys navigate their exams. Here, he even understands that his disability can serve to make him look more "sincere." This social intelligence is important to get through life, even if it's a bit shallow. It's suggested that the Man is a former student, and that he has grown to understand Hector's philosophy about Oxford and Cambridge as he got older. In this scene, Hector's way of looking at the world seems to have staying power, while Irwin has begun to distrust his own philosophy, even though it helped him get ahead in life.

Replying to Irwin's question about the money, the Man says that his counsellor told him payment would be "therapeutic." Irwin says he's surprised anyone is interested in the story, and we gather that the Man is writing some sort of journalistic piece. He says that because Irwin is a celebrity, the story doesn't have to be a big one. Irwin asks if the Man wrote the piece, and the man says "yes," then clarifies that he had help from someone at the paper. He says that Irwin looks good in the story. Irwin asks how Hector comes off. The man doesn't reply.

The Man seems to be using social acceptance and success (in the form of money) to deal with internal turmoil (he has a therapist). However, he has just said that Oxford and Cambridge failed to make him happy—this journalism strategy might be doomed, too. Irwin, as usual, is concerned with appearances. He wants to come off well in the piece, but he also wants to know how Hector looks.

Then the Man says that the piece doesn't mention anything about Irwin and Dakin. Irwin says that nothing happened with Dakin, and the Man says he doesn't believe that. Irwin says "it's not true," and the Man says, "you used to say that wasn't important." He says that Irwin "liked" Dakin, and asks if he wants to talk about it. Irwin repeats that nothing happened. The man asks if Dakin liked Irwin—he says, "I need to know." Irwin asks why. Then Irwin asks if the Man is recording this conversation, and the Man doesn't reply. Irwin realizes (or assumes) that he is, and asks, "how did you come to this?"

The Man here shows how shallow Irwin's beliefs about truth can seem. Of course, it's very important to Irwin whether or not he truly had sex with Dakin—but he often argues that truth isn't at issue in history. We also begin to sense in this moment that Dakin and Irwin's relationship is personally important to the Man (giving more hints to his identity as Posner). Even after many years, the Man feels a personal stake in the sexual relationship of two other men.

The Man says that it won't go to print without a comment from Irwin, and that it's a chance to tell his side of the story, to avoid looking like Hector. Irwin says, "I wasn't like Hector. Now fuck off." He wheels back towards the Director, and the Man calls after him, asking if he can sign a book. Irwin takes it, and asks whom to make it out to. The Man says it's for him, David. Irwin says that he only knows the Man as Posner. He says that he's going to inscribe the book "To Posner," and that he means it to be "unfriendly." Posner briefly protests, but then he is hurried away by a Make-up Assistant.

Irwin here overcomes his desire to maintain his image. He knows that he didn't grope the boys like Hector did, and he doesn't need a newspaper article to say so. This suggests a growing understanding that there is some kind of personal truth that isn't dependent on other people's perceptions of you. It's also finally revealed that the Man is Posner—who is still dwelling on the past social dynamics of the school. He seems to have remained an outsider, and is still unhappy, despite his intellectual aptitude.

Irwin goes back to the lighted area to film his narration. He says that nowadays, people care more about things than they do about people, and that this is why they find Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries shocking. It meant the destruction and loss of *things*. He says that people don't focus on a loss of community or on the loss of a spiritual practice. This is ironic, Irwin says, because the monasteries were meant to be a place to escape things. He ends with the counterintuitive conclusion that the dissolution of the monasteries thus brought them to their purpose and their "apotheosis" by allowing an escape from worldly objects. The Director says that sounds good, though "apotheosis" might still be too erudite. Irwin responds that this is "BBC Two," which is a place for British television's more highbrow shows.

Irwin is still using his old intellectual formula, making counterintuitive claims to sound smart. In fact, the Director thinks that he sounds a little too *smart, a reminder that Irwin isn't purely an entertainer at heart. In fact, Irwin's point about the monasteries rings true in this scene, especially in the context of the play's overall argument about history. Bennett has suggested that historical stories can never encompass the whole truth of an experience, and Irwin makes that point here, saying that people focus on the wrong things when they look back at the story of the monasteries.*

The scene flashes back again, to Hector's classroom. Hector seems "somber and distracted." Posner steps up to define apotheosis: "a perfect example of its type. Moment of highest fulfillment." It takes Hector a moment to realize what he has said, but then he says that this is "very good." He calls the class's attention, and says that he has something to tell them. Akthar and Dakin cut him off, saying that they know: Hector is now going to share his lesson times with Irwin. Hector begins to say that that wasn't what he was going to tell them, but Timms, Lockwood, Crowther, and Akthar are busy quipping with each other about how different Hector's lessons are from Irwin's. Hector says that he's not in the mood for this. Dakin jokes, "what mood is that sir? The subjunctive?"

This scene transition makes the point that Hector's classes teach people more, at least in some ways, than Irwin's historical broadcasts do. Posner is expected to know and define the word "apotheosis," which is too difficult for the TV audience. This scene also reminds us of Mrs. Lintott's point that students don't tend to see teachers as people—the boys focus on their own jokes rather than on the important talk that Hector wants to have with them. They are looking with hope towards their own lives and futures, and they don't necessarily notice that the teachers might have their own hopes, dreams, and troubles.

Hector tells them all to get back to reading. Akthar and Lockwood complain that that's no fun. Hector, becoming more worked up, asks if they think his classes are just fun. Posner tries to say that they're more than just fun, and Akthar asks if Posner singing will cheer Hector up. Then Hector loses his temper. He tells them to "shut up," calling them "mindless fools." He asks, "what made me piss my life away in this god-forsaken place? There's nothing left of me." He dismisses the class and puts his head on his desk. At first the boys think that he's joking, but when they realize he's serious, they don't know what to do. Scripps is closest to Hector, and he motions to Dakin that Hector is crying. Neither boy moves to comfort him. Eventually, Posner comes up and pats him on the back. Scripps, narrating to the audience, says that he should have been the one to do this, or Dakin, but that they didn't. He says that he later wrote the scene down.

Hector's breakdown is the clearest evidence we have that he feels, at least in some ways, that his life has been a failure. His classes include fun and silliness, which he usually seems to feel serve an important purpose, but here he questions that assumption—or at least is frustrated by his own past happiness. The play as a whole never lets the audience get too comfortable with any one interpretation of events, and that's part of Bennett's argument about history—it's impossible to tell a complete story that takes every nuance into account. In the previous scene, we saw that Irwin has in some ways come to think of his own educational philosophy as false and showy, and here we see that Hector doubts his, too. The play doesn't hold either of the men up as the true path to success and happiness.

Hector begins to recover. He says that he doesn't know what he was crying about. Timms, trying to bring things back to normal, says that Dakin and Scripps have a scene from a film for him. Hector says that's good, as there are currently twenty-three pounds up to be won if he can't guess it. The two boys do a portion of a scene from the movie *The Seventh Veil*. Hector pretends not to know it at first, but then gets it on his third try. The boys pay up, and the bell rings. They all clear out, and Hector is left alone on stage, "sitting at the table."

The image of Hector alone at the table when the boys have left reminds us of his status as a social outsider. After all the noise and silliness have cleared out of his classroom, he's alone with his own thoughts. In this moment, the fact that we don't hear Hector's internal dialogue (a device Bennett often uses to portray his characters' unique inner lives) reminds us that we can't always know the full personal story behind any series of events.

The scene changes. The Headmaster asks Mrs. Lintott whether Hector told her the reason for his departure. She says, "more or less." The Headmaster is surprised. He says that he hasn't told anyone, and adds that he hopes Hector will decide to leave on his own. Mrs. Lintott says that Hector wants to stay, and that she's here to ask about that. The Headmaster launches into a long explanation of Hector's shortcomings as a teacher. He says that there's no way to concretely measure Hector's results, and that his classes are too wide-ranging. Then he says, "so the upshot is I am glad he handled his pupils' balls because that at least I can categorize." It is clear that Mrs. Lintott did not know this, and the Headmaster says that he assumed she did. He asks her to be discreet with this information, and tells her that it happened on the **motorcycle**, and that he finds it completely unacceptable.

The Headmaster articulates a vision of the modern British education system, which is results-driven. He wants to be able to "categorize" his teachers' impact on their students. This vision of education demands a clear set of goals and standards, and it therefore relies on the idea that there is a certain clear, correct "truth" that the teachers can impart to students—and Hector's teaching style doesn't conform to these ideas (but neither does Irwin's). Hector's sexual acts with the boys become, in this scene, another thing to "categorize." We see again that the Headmaster's outlook on life is not emotional, and instead is all about results.

The Headmaster exits, and Mrs. Lintott begins narrating to the audience. She says that she has so far not been given an inner voice in the play, but rather has been a witness to the "predilections and preoccupations of men." She says that it is condescending of the Headmaster to assume so much discretion on her part. He is treating her as a safe person to confide in because she is a woman. Irwin enters, and Mrs. Lintott says to him that the Headmaster is "a twat."

Again, the narrative aside calls attention to the way that the story is being told—this time to point out that we have been hearing only a male perspective on these events. The Headmaster didn't imagine that Mrs. Lintott would call him a "twat"—he thought because she's a woman, she would be deferential and discreet.

Mrs. Lintott asks Irwin if he thinks that Hector is a good teacher, and Irwin says he supposes that he does. Mrs. Lintott says that she does not. She thinks that he inspires some students to think, unrealistically, that they can be artists. She wonders what learning poems and songs by heart is "except as some sort of insurance against the boys' ultimate failure." But she says that it doesn't matter now, and Irwin asks her what she means. She doesn't tell him. She asks why Irwin is here at the time of Hector's lesson, and he reminds her that they are sharing. Mrs. Lintott assumes that this was the Headmaster's idea. She exits, calling the Headmaster a "twat" as she goes.

Hector uses poetry as a buffer against his own failures, and perhaps he is teaching the boys to lead a life somewhat like his. Because we know that Hector's life is marked by difficulty and loneliness, this may not be in the students' best interests. Mrs. Lintott's insight here thus links the theme of hope and failure with that of one's educational philosophy. Irwin's teaching style seems more appropriate to those who hope to avoid failure and find success, while Hector's is appropriate for those who think that failure and suffering are inevitable.

The boys and Hector enter the room. Irwin asks Hector how they should start, and he says that he usually has the boys decide. They are silent when Irwin asks them for ideas, and when Hector encourages them to respond and not to "sulk," Dakin says that they're not sure how to act, because they act differently in Irwin's and Hector's classes. Timms says that they're not sure if they should be "thoughtful" or "smart." Hector says they should be "civil," and hits Timms. Timms lodges a mock complaint to Irwin as a "witness," and Irwin tells them all to "settle down." He says that he thinks they should talk about the Holocaust. Hector asks, nonplussed, how you can teach the Holocaust. Irwin takes this as their first question—can you and should you teach a class about the Holocaust?

This shared lesson dramatizes the clash between Irwin's and Hector's educational philosophies. The boys' main difficulty seems to be that they don't know how to act when both teachers are present—they adapt their behavior depending on the class. This reminds the audience of the play's argument that neither Irwin's nor Hector's way of thinking about knowledge is inherently better. They simply create different outcomes, and lead the boys to behave (and, taking the long view, to live their lives) differently.

Akthar says that it is "a subject like any other," and Scripps protests that it's "not like any other at all." Hector says that concentration camps are now destinations for school trips, and that he has always wondered where students "eat their sandwiches." Crowther says that it happens in a "'visitors' center. It's like anywhere else." Hector further wonders whether they take pictures there, and says that there would be no appropriate expression in a photo, much as an exam question is inappropriate. He says that any answer will "demean the suffering involved." Irwin says that "tone" or "tact" is the issue, and Hector calls it instead "decorum."

This section extends the play's arguments about our limited understanding of history. Hector's view is that in telling a story about the Holocaust, or viewing it as a tourist attraction, we fail to fully recognize the human suffering involved. This recalls Irwin's discussion about monasteries at the beginning of the act, when he argued that we can only relate to monks' toilets, and not to their spiritual beliefs. In these cases, both teachers suggest that we are too pre-occupied with our own small, everyday concerns to be able to empathize fully with people in the past.

Lockwood suggests that they could write that the Holocaust is so far beyond their life experience that they must remain silent on the topic. Dakin counters that this answer could apply to many different topics. Hector agrees, earnestly. Dakin then quotes the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein: "whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent." Irwin says this is good, but Hector says it's "flip" and "glib." He calls it, groaningly, "journalism." Dakin protests that it's Hector who taught him this quote, and Hector says, "I didn't teach you and Wittgenstein didn't screw it out of his very guts in order for you to turn it into a dinky formula." He says he thought Dakin would see that, and Dakin says that he does understand, he no longer agrees.

This exchange points to the difficulty of applying Hector's educational philosophy in the real world. The boys must take the exam if they want to go to good universities, but in doing so, they have to ignore some of the ways that Hector has taught them to understand and empathize with people through history and literature. Hector here suggests that Dakin is not accessing to full truth of Wittgenstein's statement, but is instead reducing it to a formula that he can use to pass an exam. To Hector, this is not what education should be about—but Dakin is now rebelling against his teacher's views.

Timms recalls a time in class when Hector said that one death can be more instructive than many deaths. Timms quotes Hector back to himself: "when people are dying like flies, you said, that is what they are dying like." But Posner objects that in the Holocaust, people were "processed" and killed, and that this makes it different. Irwin says this is good, and Hector objects, saying, "Posner is not making a point. He is speaking from the heart." Dakin says that this doesn't matter. He turns to Irwin, and reminds him of his idea that Hitler is not a crazed lunatic, but a politician "discernibly operating within the framework of traditional German foreign policy." Dakin asks whether, within that argument, they could say that "the death camps have to be seen in the context of this policy." Irwin calls this line of argument "inexpedient." Hector repeats the word incredulously.

The distinction here between making a point and speaking from the heart gets at the tension between the two educational philosophies in the play. These approaches seem to be at odds, but Posner is able to make an original and compelling argument about the Holocaust, and he does so because of his emotional connection to the subject matter. Dakin, on the other hand, uses Irwin's formulaic approach, and comes up with an argument that even Irwin finds distasteful.

Irwin starts to say that for one thing, the argument isn't true. But Scripps cuts in to remind him that they've already discarded truth as a major factor in crafting their examination answers. It's practically just "another point of view." Hector asks, "why can you not simply condemn the camps outright as an unprecedented horror?" A "slight embarrassment" follows these words, and Lockwood replies that it won't set them apart, because every student will take this line: "evil unprecedented, etc." Hector says that "etcetera" is what the Nazis would have said, and that reading George Orwell should have taught them to treat language with more care. Lockwood revises his wording, but still suggests that the camps could be put "in proportion" in an examination answer.

Here, Irwin undercuts his own argument from previous classes when he suggests that the boys should be looking for some sort of "truth" in history. This suggests that he understands the shortcomings of his approach—or at least acknowledges them when dealing with a sensitive subject like the Holocaust. Though there is no one historical truth, it is still possible to misinterpret events by approaching them in a way that is too detached or formulaic—and Irwin's approach always runs this risk.

Scripps objects to the word "proportion" and Dakin calls it "context." Posner says that putting something in context is on the road towards explaining it away, and forgetting its true gravity. Rudge speaks a French proverb meaning "to understand all is to forgive all," and Hector is again discouraged by the shallow use of this quote (he groans). Irwin says Posner's point is "good" and Posner counters, "It isn't 'good.' I mean it, sir." Dakin says that putting the Holocaust in context is the same as putting the Dissolution of the Monasteries by Henry VIII in context, but Posner says that the Holocaust is different because his relatives were killed. Irwin says "good point" and Scripps objects that Irwin sees the Holocaust as just another topic for the exam. Irwin says this isn't true, but that as historians, it is important to find distance, even on a subject like the Holocaust.

The idea of stripping emotion from academia is a major feature of Irwin's philosophy, and a major way in which it differs from Hector's. This points to the ways that these two teachers see education functioning in life. Hector views education as a part of one's personal life, while Irwin views it as wholly separate. This partly points to the age difference between the two teachers. For Hector, education is inseparable from life, and this is not always for the best (his marriage may have suffered for it). Irwin, on the other hand, may not yet understand that it's usually impossible to keep one's emotional life and career completely separate.

The bell rings. Irwin tells Hector that he thought the lesson went well. Hector says that it was discouraging to hear the boys use his knowledge in that way. He had hoped to be "lining their minds with some sort of literary insulation, proof against the primacy of fact." But the boys have been drawn to use that literature as part of Irwin's examination game. The worst part of it, he says, is that Irwin "wanted them to show off, to come up with the short answer, the handy quote." He says that it's time for him to go, and Irwin asks where, but Scripps and Dakin enter, so Hector says that he just means he has to go home. He exits.

This moment, when Hector reveals that he also wants the boys to compete on the exam, suggests that Mrs. Lintott's idea about "insurance against ultimate failure" might be correct. Hector does want the boys to be successful, but his style of teaching does not have that as its goal. Yet Hector also fails to recognize that the class period was intellectually stimulating and challenging for the boys because it involved a clash between his teaching style and Irwin's, both of which have some intellectual value. The play has argued that adulthood involves balancing competing values, and this class on the Holocaust suggests that the boys should, in fact, draw from both Hector's and Irwin's teachings if they want to have happy and successful lives.


Dakin tells Irwin that he and Scripps were just discussing whether Irwin is disingenuous—insincere—or meretricious—falsely attractive. Dakin says that Irwin is not disingenuous. He asks whether Irwin's idea that our perspective changes on history as time goes on also applies to literature. Irwin says that it doesn't—art is different. Dakin says, "we still love you, even if you are a bit flash," and Irwin exits.

Irwin's statement that "art is different" affects our reading of the play, which, of course, falls into the art category. Even Irwin believes that literature can contain emotional truths that endure over time. Thus the play suggests that it is not always possible to know the factual truth of events, but it may be possible to communicate emotional truths through art.

Scripps teases Dakin for flirting with Irwin. Dakin says that he wants to impress Irwin in a way that surprises even himself. Scripps says that what he doesn't like about Irwin is the way he argues for things that he doesn't even believe in, and Dakin says that sex is like that—just "making it up all the time. Being different, outrageous." Then Dakin says that Hector no longer seems to like him as much. Scripps says that he's stopped taking anyone on his motorcycle. Dakin says that's because he's been fired—he found out through Fiona. Scripps is surprised, but they both agree that they won't miss the "genital massage." Dakin asks if they are "scarred for life," and Scripps says that he hopes it will "turn me into Proust."

Dakin here suggests that he views sex as a performance, much in the same way that Irwin views academics. We have already seen ways in which Irwin's philosophy is shallow, and Dakin's sexual philosophy seems similarly shallow as well. It doesn't take emotions into account, and Dakin also doesn't describe Fiona as a person. The boys are also flippant about Hector's groping, while for Hector, the groping is very serious—both as an expression of repressed desires and as the act that has destroyed his career.



The scene changes to the Headmaster's study. He tells Irwin that he's gotten a letter from Posner's parents, who are Jewish, and object to Irwin's ideas about putting the Holocaust in "proportion." Irwin says that they did discuss the Holocaust, and "ways of discussing it that went beyond mere lamentation." The Headmaster doesn't want to hear this argument. He says that Irwin must write a letter of apology to the Posner parents, and suggests again that Irwin grow a moustache. Then the scene changes. Posner tells Irwin that he suggested to his family that the Holocaust is "a historical fact like other historical facts," and Irwin apologizes for being "too dispassionate." Posner asks what he should do if the Holocaust comes up on the exam. Irwin says that, because he's Jewish, Posner can get away with more on the exam than other students can. He concludes, "but…say what you think."

The Headmaster is, as usual, only concerned with image. He doesn't object to Irwin's argument on intellectual or moral grounds: he is just concerned that it made some parents angry. This conversation reminds us of the need to balance social convention with intellectual exploration. Irwin makes a similar argument to Posner—that Posner's status as a Jewish student means that he has the ability to make different arguments about the Holocaust than other students could. Irwin counsels Posner to use a mix of social finesse and intellectual ability to be successful on the exam—essentially to exploit any advantage possible.

In a new scene, Irwin is passing back essays. Dakin boasts that he's getting the hang of Irwin's expectations—"it's like a game"—but it turns out that Irwin has given him a low grade. Scripps tells Dakin that his handwriting is starting to look like Irwin's, and that Posner's is too. Posner responds that Dakin writes like Irwin, while he writes like Dakin. Dakin says that he talks about Irwin so much now that Fiona has to have sex with him to get him to stop talking. Scripps asks if Dakin has considered sleeping with Irwin, and Dakin says that he's thought about it, to "bring a little sunshine into [Irwin's] life."

In this scene, sexual attraction leads to social conformity, as the boys end up having similar writing styles because of their desires. Posner even points out this specific connection, suggesting that he writes like Dakin because he likes Dakin, while Dakin writes like Irwin because he likes Irwin. Dakin also flaunts his sexuality, gratuitously bringing up his relationship with Fiona, and also assuming that he can make Irwin happy just by sleeping with him.

Scripps begins to ask Dakin about having sex with Fiona, and Posner asks whether Dakin is ever worried about not having sex to look forward to anymore. Dakin says he looks forward to more sex—and he just wishes that it could be with Irwin. Dakin exits. Posner tells Scripps that he knows Irwin likes Dakin. Posner always looks at Dakin in class, so he sees Irwin doing so, to. Scripps comforts Posner that his feelings "will pass." Posner says he's not sure he wants them too, but they're painful. Scripps reminds him that Hector considers pain the best education. Posner says he wishes he could get graded for it.

Posner's question about delaying the gratification of sex recalls his conversation with Hector at the end of act one. Posner is inclined to stay on the edges of life, not jumping fully into anything, and this will likely lead to frustration. Posner's comments about pain also remind us that the emotional education that Hector wants to give the boys doesn't lead to any external validation, even if it does strengthen them emotionally.

The scene changes. Hector, Irwin, and Mrs. Lintott are sitting behind a table, giving the boys mock admissions interviews. They ask the boys about their interests, but when Crowther begins to mention acting, Irwin says that he shouldn't emphasize that. The university professors will look down on it. Hector says, wryly, "so much for Shakespeare," and encourages the boys to talk about what they enjoy. When Posner says he like Mozart, Irwin tells him to say something more unusual. Hector says that they should tell the truth. Irwin agrees, provided that they can "make it seem like [they're] telling the truth."

In this scene, Irwin teaches the boys to portray an image of truth rather than truth itself, as he believes that truth is not always the most effective way to get ahead. Hector, on the other hand, thinks that it's more important to be yourself than it is to get into a good university. These mock interviews show that the boys will have to be particular versions of themselves if they want to get into Oxford and Cambridge—and the implication here is that worldly success leaves little room for personal expression.

Hector asks Mrs. Lintott what she thinks. She reminds them that one of the dons interviewing them might be a woman. She says she doubts they have considered this. She catches Dakin yawning as she speaks. Timms says that this line of conversation is embarrassing to the boys, because the inequality is "not [their] fault." Lockwood quotes Wittgenstein to back up this point: "the world is everything that is the case." Mrs. Lintott asks if Wittgenstein was gay ("did he travel on the other bus?") and Hector confirms that he was. She says this makes sense, as the quote Lockwood has offered actually shows a "rueful, accepting" stance toward the world, while a straight man would say, "the world is everything that can be made to seem the case."

Mrs. Lintott points out that the men in the room have been blind to one factor that affects admissions: gender. She suggests that Irwin's way of looking at the world — it is "everything that can be made to seem the case" — is typical of straight male privilege. Each of the teachers on the panel has a different view of reality and how the boys should best express it. In the context of history admissions interviews, this reminds us that there is no one historical truth. It all depends on perspective, and perspective includes gender.

Mrs. Lintott says that there are no women historians on TV because they "don't get carried away" promoting whatever new thought comes into their heads. The other reason, she says, is that history is more painful for women than it is for men, because they "never get round the conference table." History, therefore, is made up of men's mistakes and "incapabilities." She says, "what is history? History is women following behind with the bucket." They don't need to argue this on the exam, she says, but they might allude to it briefly. The boys meet this tirade with silence. Mrs. Lintott notes that the other teachers, and some of the boys, seem to "find this undisguised expression of feeling distasteful."

Mrs. Lintott's story about history takes a different set of events into account. Usually, stories focus on the conference table where decisions are made, not on a person "following behind with the bucket." Her point is similar to Irwin's point about how the boys should tell an unconventional story about history, but Irwin has been acting from a male perspective of power and privilege—being able to shape history however he wants to. Mrs. Lintott also includes emotion in her argument, which is more in line with Hector's style, and she adds an understanding of gender that neither man has incorporated.

Irwin calls Rudge for a mock interview. Mrs. Lintott asks him how he defines history. He answers, after asking permission to swear, that "it's just one fucking thing after another." She asks him why he wants to come to Christ Church, the smaller college within Oxford University that he has chosen to apply to. Rudge says that he thought he had the best chance of acceptance there. He wants to talk about sports, but eventually says that he also likes movies. They discuss this briefly, then Rudge says bluntly that he's "shit at this," but maybe they'll accept him because he's "dull and ordinary" and pleasant to spend time with on the golf course. He "may not know much about Jean-Paul Sartre," but he *is* good at golf. The bell goes off, ending Rudge's interview. The boys file out.

Rudge here brings up class as another hidden aspect of the admissions process. Irwin has been coaching the boys to present a certain image, and that image is also of someone who isn't "dull and ordinary"—who is, or has the potential to be, an upper-class person. Rudge says that he can't project that image, and doesn't want to. He also offers a different view of history: he's arguing that it doesn't have a story, it's just a random collection of events. This is actually very close to the play's overall argument about history. Rudge again proves to have more intellectual ability than most people give him credit for.

Dakin and Irwin are left on stage. Dakin asks how Irwin did at Oxford, and he says that he got a second degree (not top honors). He says that he was at Corpus college. Dakin notes that none of the boys are applying there. He asks if Irwin thinks they'll be happy at university, and Irwin says that Dakin will be. Dakin fills in the reason: he is "uncomplicated," "outgoing," and "straight." He says he might prefer to be "complicated." Irwin asks how Posner is doing, given that he likes Dakin. Dakin says that Posner's affection is "boring" and that he wouldn't do anything about it, because Posner is "too young." The sexual charge has been building throughout this scene, and then Dakin tells Irwin, "you still look quite young." There is a long pause.

Sexuality, like class and gender, also influences how people's lives unfold. Dakin suggests that he has a better chance at happiness given that he is straight, but he also (rather naively) says that he sometimes wishes his life had more pain in it—a reminder of Scripps's statement that pain is the best education. Happiness and intellectual growth seem to be at odds in this scene, but of course the reality is always more complicated. The long-anticipated affair between Dakin and Irwin now seems practically inevitable.

Dakin asks Irwin how history happens, then fills in the answer: people "make moves." Irwin responds that "others react to events." They banter briefly about whether Poland was "surprised" by Hitler's advances, then turn to Dakin's essay, which is about "turning points" in history. Irwin suggests a few major ones, and Dakin agrees that he has written about them, but he has also written about two moments when chance or randomness came into play and led to drastic consequences. Irwin says that this essay sounds "first class." Dakin says it's like a game, and Irwin reminds him that thinking about history this way makes him take another look at what actually happened. Dakin calls this "subjunctive history," and says Hector is crazy about the subjunctive, the "mood you use when something might or might not have happened."

Posner previously said that he stands at the edges of life without taking bold action, and here Irwin seems to have a similar tendency. Dakin, on the other hand, is drawn to action. This scene uses the sexual tension between Dakin and Irwin to make a point about how history unfolds. Actions have unintended consequences, and actions that aren't *taken can also be crucial. In this moment, a sexual affair between Dakin and Irwin seems probable, but hasn't happened yet. After the fact, the story will seem set, but this scene serves to remind us that history is actually fluid and random.*

In a new scene, the boys and teachers are all taking a photograph. Posner, squatting in front, jokes that he'd "just like to graduate to a chair." Mrs. Lintott and the Headmaster arrange the boys, and then the Headmaster asks Hector to take the photo. Mrs. Lintott objects, but the Headmaster says the photo is "for the school." He tells them to "look like Oxbridge material," As Hector takes the photo, he quotes a line of poetry: "magnificently unprepared for the long littleness of life." The boys do a "farewell song and dance" to a Gracie Fields song, and then they all exit.

Hector's line of poetry here calls attention to the sense of hope that this moment contains. The boys are celebrating the end of a major life chapter, but their life in the future will contain mostly small moments—not big ones like this. The photo will also be a "true" image of this moment, but it won't express all of the complicated dynamics that we've come to understand throughout the play.

Irwin and Mrs. Lintott wait for the Headmaster. They are not sure what he wants to discuss with them, but they assume that it has to do with Hector. Irwin asks if Hector's wife knows what's going on, and Mrs. Lintott says that Hector doesn't think so. Mrs. Lintott herself suspects that his wife does an idea of the truth, and may even have married Hector for his "lukewarm attentions." Mrs. Lintott muses on the randomness of Hector's fate, "the junction of a dizzying range of alternatives any one of which could have had a different outcome." She says that analyzing this incident with the students would teach them more about history than she has "managed to do so far."

In Mrs. Lintott's opinion, Hector's wife is probably aware of her husband's homosexual inclinations, and may even welcome them. Mrs. Lintott's analysis gives Hector's wife a perspective and an opinion, something that the male characters in the play have not yet done. Mrs. Lintott's comments about the randomness of history also remind the audience that it is useless to try to look for a clear narrative to explain events. There's no one true explanation.

Irwin wonders aloud how the boys will do at University. Mrs. Lintott asks him if he wishes he could go back, and he says that he's "not clever enough. Not…anything enough really." He says that he fantasizes about making a big research breakthrough to "fling it in their faces," and Mrs. Lintott suggests that Oxford just cares that he make a lot of money. Hector and the Headmaster emerge from the office, and the Headmaster calls Mrs. Lintott in with him. The Headmaster and Mrs. Lintott exit.

Here, we learn more about Irwin's hopes and dreams. He wanted to make academic breakthroughs so that he could feel successful—and also achieve a kind of revenge. Mrs. Lintott reminds him that success in other realms of life might also earn him the acclaim that he wants. Irwin is young, but he already feels that he has failed, and he wants to find ways to redeem himself. His academic bravado is one of those ways.

Hector tells Irwin that the discussion will be about his "marching orders," and Irwin says that Dakin has already told him. Hector asks if Irwin knows why he has been asked to leave, and Irwin says yes. Hector says that he has an idea to make a mobile library and drive around on "the open road." Then he says that he didn't want to teach students who, in middle age, would talk grandly (and, he implies, shallowly) in middle age about their "love of words." He tells Irwin that that's why he includes so much "sheer calculated silliness"— to fight against that self-aggrandizement.

Irwin just expressed a desire for a grand self-image as an academic, but here Hector muses on the fact that this kind of image is shallow and ultimately false. Hector wants students to actually live better, not to simply use literature as a way to make themselves appear smarter or more successful. Now that he himself is old and facing failure, he simply wants to experience more of life by traveling.

Irwin asks if a student has ever made Hector "unhappy," and Hector says that he's over that phase. He sees pain as an "inoculation" which will "provide immunity" for future situations. Irwin calls this "love," and Hector says that no one could love him because he talks too much. Then Hector tells Irwin not to keep teaching. Irwin says that he didn't "intend" to, and Hector says that most people end up doing it without intending to. He expected teaching young people to "renew" him and provide "vitality," but instead it creates "a fatigue that passes for philosophy but is nearer to indifference." Hector cautions Irwin not to "touch him" (implying Dakin). He says it will make the boys think Irwin is a "fool," as they now think that Hector is.

Hector and Irwin are here discussing the ways that they can deal with sexual attraction to students. Hector tells Irwin that it might be painful to ignore it, but he should—it won't bring the happiness that he seeks. Hector also suggests that some of his "wisdom" is actually just fatigue. He doesn't necessarily have the key to life, even if some students think that he does. Teachers can't rely on students for fulfillment, and students can't rely on teachers, either. Hector thus suggests that you have to find fulfillment for yourself, and that neither sex nor philosophy is a shortcut to happiness.

Mrs. Lintott re-emerges from the office. Hector says that he assumes she knew, and the boys too. Mrs. Lintott jokes that "they had it first hand." Hector begins to say that it was "more in benediction than gratification," but Mrs. Lintott says that she loves Hector, but "a grope is a grope. It is not the Annunciation." Then she says that the Headmaster is hoping Irwin will take over her position when she leaves next year. The Headmaster comes out and calls Irwin in.

Hector argues that he wasn't looking for sexual gratification, and was instead acting in the way that a priest might, trying to confer a blessing on the boys. This sounds far-fetched, and Mrs. Lintott is practical about it. She suggests that no matter how it felt to Hector, the way that other people understand his actions has greater effects.

In a narration to the audience, Scripps, Dakin, and Posner describe their visits to Oxford and Cambridge. Scripps says that he took communion there as a "genuine act of worship" but that he also "really wanted to get in." Looking back on his past self at that moment, he says, "fills me now with longing and pity." Dakin says that he stayed with a pitiable host and that he looked at a list of college alums, visited Irwin's college, Corpus, and didn't have sex. Posner says that he "can see why they make a fuss about it," because the college was beautiful. He says that he downplayed the Holocaust on his exam, and that the interviewers "praised what they called my sense of detachment."

Scripps's relationship to religion in this scene reflects the tension between personal fulfillment and success that has been building throughout the play. Balancing these two demands is a big part of Scripps's transition to the next phase of his life. Like Scripps, Posner has to balance emotional truth with playing the academic "game." He ends up impressing the dons by acting in a way that we know doesn't fully express how he feels. Scripps's "longing and pity" reflect the big, youthful hopes of this moment, and also imply that they won't all come true.

Following this narration, "the boys erupt onto the stage." The Headmaster says that all of them have received places at Oxford and Cambridge, with special honors for Posner and Dakin. He congratulates Irwin and Mrs. Lintott. Mrs. Lintott reminds him that Rudge didn't get a place, and the Headmaster says this is a pity. Then Rudge enters. He tells them that the examiners already told him his fate during the interview—he got in. Irwin is surprised, and Rudge says that he "had family connections." The Headmaster asks whether someone in his family really went to Christ Church.

Irwin's philosophy downplayed personal truth, and it achieved its intended results: the boys have all been accepted. Both Posner and Dakin learned to play Irwin's game, and this has led to success and the fulfillment of their immediate hopes. In this scene, we also see the teachers underestimating Rudge yet again, and assuming he could never get in to Oxbridge.

Rudge says that his father was a servant there, and this came up during his interview. One of the older interviewers asked him about it, and then said that this was what they were looking for as "evidence of how far they had come, wheel come full circle and that." He says that he also played the game by saying that "Stalin was a sweetie"—and that they accepted him then and there as "plainly someone who thought for himself and just what the college rugger team needed."

Rudge's path to admission shows the randomness of history (especially the way Rudge himself described it), and also the way that class can affect events—in this case, it has a positive effect for Rudge, though he also has to deal with being underestimated throughout his school career. It also suggests that Irwin's methods alone may not have ensured the boys' admission. They tried to control the results, but a lot of it still comes down to luck.

In a new scene Dakin and Irwin are alone together. Dakin tells Irwin that he looked up his name at Corpus while visiting Oxford, and that Irwin wasn't listed. Irwin plays this down, but Dakin persists, saying that it matters "because I imagined you there." Irwin admits that he didn't get into Oxford for his undergraduate degree—he only went for "a teaching diploma." He asks whether this "makes a difference," and Dakin shrugs. He says that they've established that lying works, but Irwin should learn to be a better liar. Then he casually suggests that they get a drink.

Here we see the depth of Irwin's insecurity. He projects himself as the kind of person who went to Oxford for his undergraduate degree, when in fact he didn't. This reminds us that Irwin's philosophy is all about image, and not about truth. He has used a lie to make himself seem like an expert—but in fact, his lessons actually worked. Telling the truth doesn't necessarily guarantee a good outcome, and lying can work. But lying about who you are can also mask unhappiness without actually solving it. Irwin may appear successful, but he feels like a failure.

Irwin says that he can't tonight. Dakin suggests tomorrow. Irwin can't. Dakin says that the drink is a euphemism, and that he's actually wondering "whether there were any circumstances in which there was a chance of your sucking me off." Irwin says that he didn't know Dakin was "that way inclined," and Dakin says that he isn't, but he thought it would be a fun celebratory measure for the end of the year. As he is leaving, he turns to Irwin and says that there's a distinct difference between the way he lives and the way he teaches. In argument, he is bold and reckless, but "when it's something that's actually happening, I mean now, you're so fucking careful."

After all their flirting, here Dakin finally asks Irwin directly for what he wants—he's no longer playing that kind of game. This reminds the audience that there are often invisible dynamics playing out beneath events, and that what is on the surface doesn't convey the full truth of the situation. Dakin's comment about Irwin's timidity also highlights the fact that Irwin's academic philosophy is partly a way for him to deal with his feelings of insecurity in life.

Irwin protests that Dakin has already had to endure Hector's gropings, but Dakin says that Hector is "a joke" and that Irwin couldn't be like him. Irwin says Hector isn't a joke, but Dakin says "that side of him is." Irwin says that the situation is a cliché, and Dakin says that while clichés don't play well on exams, "in this subject there are no examiners." He says that Irwin should give in to the fun of a cliché. Irwin agrees. He takes out his calendar and suggests next week. Dakin makes fun of his crowded schedule and his tight-laced demeanor, saying that they've "got a long way to go." He suggests Irwin take his glasses off. Irwin, flirting openly now, says "taking off my glasses is the last thing I do." Dakin leaves, saying, "we're not in the subjunctive either. It is going to happen."

Dakin reminds Irwin here that his philosophy of always taking an unconventional approach might be good for exams, but it isn't the best way to live—many conventional approaches come out of true feelings and desires. Dakin's comments about Hector also show that the boys in some ways pity their teacher. They see his loneliness as a failure, and they don't want to end up like him. Dakin's parting statement ultimately ends up highlighting the fact that certainty in life is impossible—this supposedly-inevitable sexual liaison does not come to pass, despite these plans and promises.

Dakin tells Scripps that he made Irwin this offer as a way of saying thank you. Scripps jokes that this seems excessive. Then Dakin says that he talked to the Headmaster. He asked him pointedly whether there's any difference between Hector's gropings and the Headmaster's own pursuit of his secretary, Fiona. The Headmaster eventually agreed to give Hector another chance. Scripps says that "everybody's happy." Dakin says, "I hadn't realised how easy it is to make things happen." Then Scripps steps in with some foreshadowing narration. He says, theatrically, that suggesting everybody was happy made everything unravel. Dakin showily gives Posner a hug of "reward." Posner says that it was disappointing—"too fucking brief." Dakin hugs him again. Then he puts on his **motorcycle** helmet, saying that he's going to ride with Hector "for old times' sake."

Dakin here believes that he has found a way to control events and affect the outcome of history, but the motorcycle accident will prove him wrong. This moment of the play sets up the ultimate lesson that history is random and unpredictable, and Dakin's attempts to make Irwin and Posner happy by fulfilling their sexual desires are similarly doomed to fail. Finally, Dakin's reminder that the Headmaster tolerates his own gropings of Fiona and not Hector's of the boys calls attention to a hypocrisy that has not been noted until now in the play. This reminds us again of the role of gender in how history plays out.

Hector enters, cheerful and wearing his **motorcycle** outfit. Rudge asks him whether they're still playing the guessing game for money, because he has something. Rudge sings a verse of a popular modern song. Timms says that he can't expect Hector to know such a "crap" song," and Rudge says that Gracie Fields is also crap, "only that's his crap." Hector reminds them of his presence and says that he doesn't know the song, but "his crap or my crap, it makes no difference." He says that Rudge wins the money.

Rudge wins the guessing game because he knows a popular song that no one else does. Hector's statement that both kinds of "crap" are equal also recalls the play's argument that old things aren't inherently worth celebrating. You have to decide for yourself what is important and what isn't—time or external validation aren't sufficient guides.

The Headmaster enters and sees Dakin in the **motorcycle** helmet. He immediately protests, and then Irwin walks in. Scripps says, "and here history rattled over the points…" and the Headmaster tells Hector to take Irwin instead. Irwin says "why not." Dakin hands Irwin his helmet, and tells him to hold on to his briefcase. Scripps then begins to narrate. He says that they don't know what happened, but there are many theories about why Hector crashed his motorcycle. Some suggest that he wasn't used to driving with two hands, and therefore went too fast, but Scripps find this too obvious, and says Irwin would disapprove. His own theory is that Irwin didn't know how to ride a motorcycle, and leaned the wrong way, unbalancing Hector. He says that this would be more appropriate.

We see in this moment that the motorcycle accident was the result of the random entrance by the Headmaster. This is Bennett's biggest point about history: it doesn't have one true narrative, and it unfolds through a series of random events. Scripps's narration then shows us that there is no way to be sure what happened in this life-changing accident. He suggests that some of the simpler stories don't take enough nuance into account, but he also acknowledges that it would be impossible to tell the full story.

Irwin begins narrating from his wheelchair. He says that he doesn't remember anything after his conversation with Dakin. He says that they never got their drink. Dakin, narrating, says that he "couldn't face the wheelchair," but that it's good he asked. He says, "barring accidents, it would have happened." Rudge then comes in to narrate, saying that you can't ignore accidents. He repeats his theory: "history is just one fucking thing after another." Scripps says that a person dying at school can affect your whole life.

Again Rudge articulates the play's major argument about history, reminding us that Irwin's search for a historical narrative is inadequate. Rudge, who has rejected the typical rules of the academic game at several points throughout the play, nevertheless has one of the clearest views about how history actually works.

The whole staff, including Irwin in his wheelchair, and the students sing the song *Bye Bye Blackbird* while photos of a young Hector flash across a screen. The Headmaster begins a eulogy. He says that Hector "loved language. He loved words." He helped students to gain enthusiasm about literature. Timms remembers Hector saying, or quoting, that "one person's death will tell you more than a thousand." Lockwood remembers the time that Hector put his head down on the desk in despair, and says, "it was the first time I realised a teacher was a human being." Akthar says that there was an inscrutable "contract" between Hector and his students. Crowther says that, though he was "stained and shabby," he "led you to expect the best. His death brought a lesson."

The Headmaster's eulogy proves that he doesn't understand Hector's philosophy of education at all. In this moment of suffering and sadness, however, the boys internalize Hector's lesson about how to deal with life's difficulties through the power of art and literature. It is impossible to avoid suffering, and so they turn to Hector's lessons when his death disrupts their lives.

Mrs. Lintott says that Hector didn't have an agenda about where each boy would end up. She then gives details about where the boys *do* end up. Crowther and Lockwood become judges. Akthar is a headmaster. They are all "pillars of a community that no longer has much use for pillars." Timms runs a dry-cleaning business and does drugs. Dakin is a highly paid tax lawyer. Rudge is a builder of "handy homes." Rudge himself protests to this characterization, saying, "like them or not, Rudge Homes are at least affordable homes for first-time buyers." Rudge says that death is "another excuse to patronise," something he's endured too much of. Mrs. Lintott says that she has, too. Scripps, she says, became a journalist, but is always saying he will someday "really write."

Mrs. Lintott's reminder that Hector didn't care about the boys' ultimate success points out that we, the audience, do care, at least about learning the facts. This list then offers a sense of closure, and emphasizes the ways that people must constantly seek to balance personal fulfillment with external markers of success. The list also serves as another reminder of the randomness of history. Each of the boys took different paths, ones that they couldn't have anticipated while they were in school. Rudge then claims that even in death, people try to cling to a certain narrative about history and life. He suggests that in his own case, this narrative has to do with class.

Irwin, Mrs. Lintott says, was a journalist, too—first at the school, and then on TV. Now Irwin is in politics, she says. Irwin clarifies that he is in "government." Mrs. Lintott says that either way, he hasn't gone on to an academic career. Then she turns to Posner, who she says is the "only one who truly took everything to heart." Posner lives a reclusive life in a cottage, having "periodic breakdowns." He reads a lot at the library, and follows his classmates' careers. He lives a shadow life online, and has many friends, though "none in his right name or even gender." He "has long since stopped asking himself where it went wrong."

Posner's fate is the culmination of the play's theme of frustrated expectations. Posner tries to achieve personal fulfillment, and in fact, he does understand literature and Hector's teachings in a way that the other boys do not—yet this alone isn't enough to give him a happy life. He remains an outsider, and doesn't balance the drive for worldly success that Irwin tried to instill in him. Irwin, on the other hand, has had a "successful" life, but not one that fulfills his dreams. These two characters thus once again illustrate the play's argument that adulthood involves a balance of different demands. Neither Hector's nor Irwin's philosophy is a sure-fire path to success and happiness.

Hector comes back into the scene. He tells Mrs. Lintott to finish, saying, "the bright day is done and we are for the dark." Irwin says that Hector's teaching was not suited to this time period. Scripps disagrees: "love apart, it is the only education worth having." Hector says, "Pass the parcel, that's sometimes all you can do. Take it, feel it, and pass it on…that's the game I wanted you to learn. Pass it on." The play ends.

Hector's reappearance is then a reminder to the audience and the boys that this list of accomplishments isn't what life is about. All of the boys are going to die, just as Hector has. Also like Hector, they too will have no control over the random events of their lives, or how their "histories" are told by others. Hector's final statement suggests that his teaching was a way to get the boys to savor life while they can.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Helm, Sally. "*The History Boys.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 27 Jan 2016. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Helm, Sally. "*The History Boys.*" LitCharts LLC, January 27, 2016. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-history-boys.

To cite any of the quotes from *The History Boys* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Bennett, Alan. The History Boys. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux. 2006.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Bennett, Alan. The History Boys. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux. 2006.