Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

The History Boys

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Plot

- In a Sheffield **grammar school** in the 1980s, eight clever boys stay on to try for places at Oxford and Cambridge.
- Their teacher Hector loves learning for its own sake, poetry and songs. The headmaster, who wants results, brings in Irwin, a young teacher who teaches the boys to argue cleverly and surprisingly in exams.
- Mrs Lintott, the history teacher, offers a dry, often critical voice. Hector is forced to retire after touching boys on his motorbike.
- All the boys win places. Hector dies in a motorbike accident, and Mrs Lintott tells the audience what became of the boys.

Characters and themes

- Dakin is confident and attracted to Irwin; Posner is gay and in love with Dakin; Scripps is religious and comments on events.
- Themes: the purpose of education, truth versus '**spin**', sexuality and growing up, and what history is.

Context and form

- Set in the 1980s under Margaret Thatcher and written by Alan Bennett in 2004, when schools focused on targets. It uses **direct address** to the audience and moves between scenes freely.

How to get top marks

- Compare Hector and Irwin to write about what education is for: love of knowledge, or passing exams.
- Use Bennett's methods: wit, and characters who speak directly to the audience, all carry the argument.
- Have a view about whether the play criticises the teachers or the system they work in.

Key terms

Direct address	A character speaking straight to the audience.
Spin	Presenting facts in a misleading but persuasive way.
Oxbridge	Oxford and Cambridge universities.
Grammar school	A selective state school for pupils who passed an exam at 11.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. What are the boys preparing for?
2. What does Hector believe education is for?
3. What does Irwin teach the boys?
4. Who wants the school to get good results above all?
5. Which boy is in love with Dakin?
6. Who gives a dry, critical view and tells the boys' futures?
7. When is the play set?
8. What happens to Hector at the end?

Answers

1. Entrance to Oxford and Cambridge
2. Learning for its own sake
3. To argue cleverly and surprisingly to impress examiners
4. The headmaster
5. Posner
6. Mrs Lintott
7. The 1980s
8. He dies in a motorbike accident

What to do next

Practise 10 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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