



THE HISTORY BOYS

by **ALAN BENNETT**
directed by **NICK BOWLING**

STUDY GUIDE

prepared by
Maren Robinson, Dramaturg

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— STUDY GUIDE —

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The Playwright: Alan Bennett

Alan Bennett was born May 9, 1934, in Leeds, Yorkshire. He attended Leeds Modern School. In 1957 he graduated from Exeter College, Oxford University with a first-class degree in medieval history. He made his stage debut in *Beyond the Fringe* at the 1959 Edinburgh Festival. He was a junior lecturer in history at Magdalen College, Oxford from 1960-1962.



Alan Bennett

Bennett's career includes acting, writing and directing as well as television and radio broadcasting. Like his favored poet, Philip Larkin, Bennett is bespectacled, unassuming and avuncular—and interested in and what lies beneath the surface appearances in the lives of ordinary people.

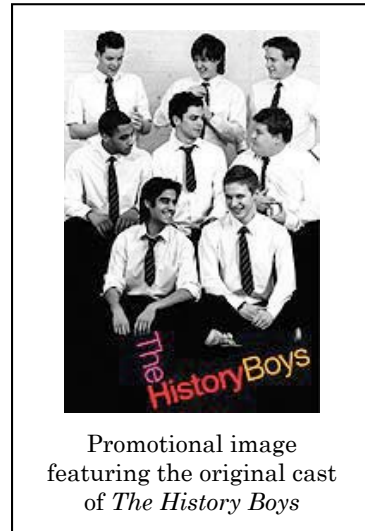
His writing career, which encompasses film, television and stage, began when he collaborated with Peter Cook, Dudley Moore and Jonathan Miller, to write the satirical review *Beyond the Fringe*, which debuted at the Edinburgh Festival in 1959 and had a successful run in London's West End.

Although Bennett has regularly performed as an actor, he is best known for his writing. He wrote for numerous television programs, often adapting successful stage work for television broadcasts. His television writing includes: *Me! I'm Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1978) and *An Englishman Abroad* (1983). He wrote two series of monologues: *Talking Heads* and *Talking Heads II* (1987 and 1998, respectively). His plays include *Forty Years On* (1968), *Getting On* (1971), *Habeas Corpus* (1973), *The Old Country* (1977), *Enjoy* (1980), *Kafka's Dick* (1986), *A Visit from Miss Prothero* (1987), *Single Spies* (1988), *The Wind in the Willows* (1990), an adaptation of Kenneth Grahame's children's book (Bennett also voiced Mr. Mole for a 1996 animated version of the story), and *The Lady in the Van* (1999).

In the United States, prior to *The History Boys*, Bennett is perhaps best known for his play *The Madness of George III*, which he adapted into the Oscar-nominated screenplay for *The Madness of King George* (1994). In 1995, he hosted a series on Westminster Abbey for the BBC. In addition to his television and film work, he has written essays and autobiographical sketches published in the volumes, *Untold Stories* (2007) and *Writing Home* (2003). His most recent work is *The Uncommon Reader* (2007) a novella in which Queen Elizabeth II is aided by a kitchen boy, Norman, in a late-discovered passion for reading.

The Play: Production History

The History Boys premiered at the National Theatre's Lyttelton Theatre in London in May 2004 and played to sold-out audiences for an extended run. It toured to Hong Kong, New Zealand and Sydney, Australia in 2006. The play premiered on Broadway in April 2006. The play has received more than 30 major awards, including Britain's Olivier award for Best New Play in 2005 and six Tony Awards, including Best Play in 2006.



The History

The history in *The History Boys* is a slippery thing. Set in the 1980s, it is a play *about* history although not necessarily about a specific historical event. The subject is eminently suited to the medium of theater. A play, like history, lives for a moment and then is gone, only to be remembered in the minds of the witnesses and their accounts. *The History Boys* has sudden shifts in time and verb tense: A boy who may be 17 in one scene suddenly seems to be a man of 30 remembering his past.

In addition to the use of memory and personal account—the tools of history—in the structure of the play, *The History Boys* also thematically deals with how history is taught and how it is used. The three instructors provide a striking difference in approach: Lintott's facts, Hector's poetry and humanism and Irwin's practical (or even cynical) expedience.

The history in the play is further complicated by the fact that Bennett in his introduction to the published version of *The History Boys* admits that he wrote the play based on his own ideas and remembrances of school life and examinations and that when he was informed that the system of examinations had changed he decided to set the play in the 1980s but he did not specifically add references from the era to the play.

Bennett in *The History Boys*

“I don’t know why it should only be Catholics who are thought never to escape their religious upbringing; I have never managed to outgrow mine.”

— Alan Bennett in the introduction to *Talking Heads*

Many authors use incidents in their own lives as fodder for their creative work. In his introduction to *Talking Heads II*, Bennett quotes fellow playwright Tom Stoppard, who likens critics looking for biographical details in a play to an airport search of luggage producing a dirty pair of underwear. Nevertheless, Bennett himself has been forthcoming about details in *The History Boys* that are based on his personal history. He seems to have spread certain characteristics among his characters.

In his introduction to *Talking Heads*, Bennett talks about his personal faith when he was a teenager. Like Scripps, he was an avid churchgoer. He believed he would take holy orders, although in his introduction to *The History Boys* he credits Scripps with having a deeper faith and more philosophical doubts. Like Scripps, he went to communion in the college chapel after his interview.

Like Posner, Bennett matured late, his voice had not broken and like Posner he had a crush on a student he hoped to impress by getting a scholarship to Oxford.

Irwin’s method of turning a question on its head and trotting out handy quotations is something that Bennett claims to have mastered while in his third year at Oxford, but he seems to have felt it was more performance and not related to depth of knowledge.

Bennett himself was part of a group of eight boys from Leeds Modern School who all achieved admittance in Oxbridge after a new headmaster encouraged them. As a student, Bennett witnessed a French Master weep and place his head on his desk and ask, “Why am I wasting my life at this God-forsaken school?”

Prior to writing *The History Boys*, Bennett said he had never been able to write successfully about his school days. Hector actually speaks words Bennett had written prior to *The History Boys* when he 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. 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.”

Northern England

Northern England often appears in Bennett’s work either as a setting or in a character’s accent. American audiences may not realize that a northern accent has been considered “common” or more working class than a southern accent. It is only in recent years that news announcers and others have not tried to lose their Northern accent.

The British Education System

The British education system is very different than the United States’.

There are public schools—the equivalent of our private schools—where students are selectively admitted and pay for their education. The names of the most elite schools, like Eton, Harrow and Rugby, may be familiar to Americans. These schools originally developed as a place the gentry could send their children to be educated; some are boarding schools, some accept day pupils.

The other type of school is the grammar school. They were founded by and supported by the nearest church “for the education of the poor.” Many are still attached to a specific church. After the Reformation these churches all would have been Anglican. Unlike the United States, there has never been a separation of church and state in the education system, and students may have classes in religion. In general, grammar schools now are financially supported by the government (although some may have endowments raised by past pupils). By the 1980s, the time period in which the play is set, most schools had accepted state funding and were open to all levels of students without payment, and as such followed a national curriculum. The schools also have reputations, and those with successful alumnae are viewed more favorably. Manchester Grammar School, Haberdashers’ Aske and Leighton Park are all respected grammar schools that are referenced in *The History Boys*.

The school in *The History Boys* is a grammar school.

The students in the play are in the Sixth Form, which is two years of additional schooling for students preparing to go on to university.

Upon completion of their education, at age 16, students take examinations in multiple subjects. Students in the Sixth Form would have been expected to score well on these exams, called the General Certificate of Secondary Education, or GCSE, sometimes called O-levels or ordinary levels. Sixth Form students spend two years studying for their General Certificate Advance Level examinations, commonly called A-levels. Like the GCSEs, the A-level exams are in specific disciplines such as math, physics, history, general studies, critical thinking and languages. A minimum of three A-levels is required by most universities, but most students take more. Universities give students a place based on their scores and the subjects they have chosen.

The Universities: Oxford and Cambridge

Oxbridge

Oxbridge is the collective term used to refer to Oxford and Cambridge, the oldest and most elite of England’s universities. The institutions are structured differently than American universities: each is a group of affiliated colleges with their own histories, traditions and founders. A college may be known for its strength in certain subjects, but the colleges are not discipline specific, and students may take courses across the

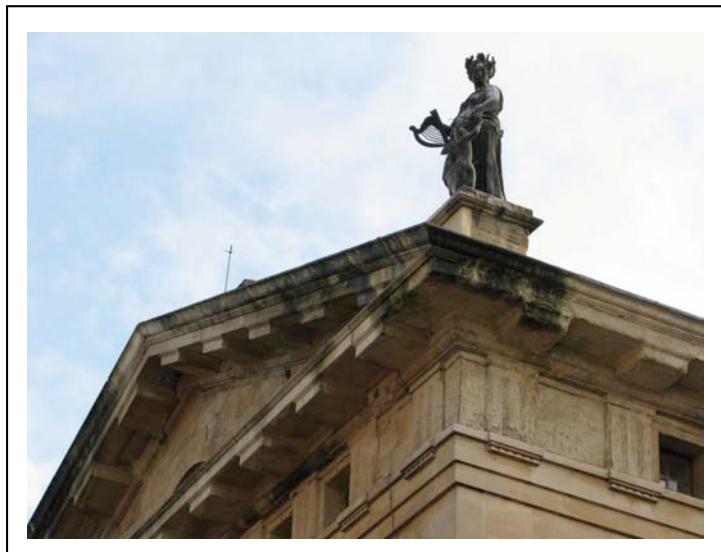
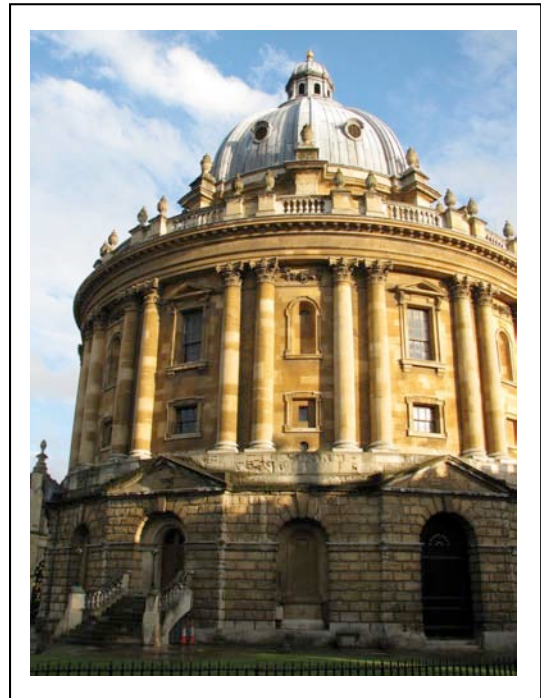
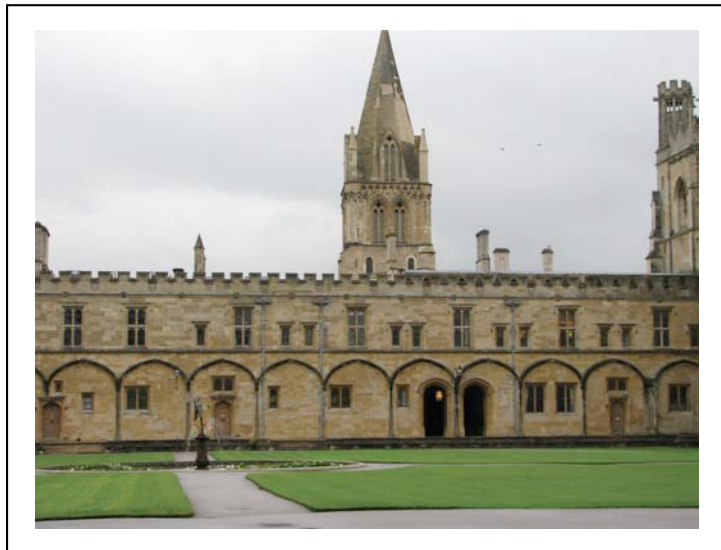
university. In addition to their high A-level scores, students seeking admittance to Oxford or Cambridge take a special admission examination and are interviewed by members of the specific college to which they are applying.

Oxford University

The oldest university in England and one of the top universities in the world, it is a collection of affiliated colleges. Disciplines of study cross colleges but the details of tutors are decided by the individual colleges. Christ Church, Jesus, Corpus and Magdalen are all Colleges within Oxford that are mentioned in the play. Christ Church is the oldest and largest college.

University of Cambridge

Cambridge dates its inception to 1209. Like Oxford, it is a collection of independent colleges that are independently governed and choose their own students who study a variety of disciplines across the university.



Images of Oxford University: Christ Church (top left); Radcliffe Camera (above) and detail of architecture (bottom left). Photos by Maren Robinson.

University Rankings

2007 Rankings of Universities mentioned in *The History Boys*, from the *Times*

Rank	University
1	Oxford
2	Cambridge
6	Loughborough
7	Bristol
10	Durham
18	Lester
24	Sheffield
25	Newcastle
26	Manchester
34	Leeds
49	Hull

Timeline of the 1980s

- 1979-1990** Margaret Thatcher serves as prime minister of England for the Tory (Conservative) Party; she is the first woman elected to this post
- 1980** John Lennon is murdered.
- 1980** The Rubik's Cube becomes wildly popular.
- 1981** Rupert Murdoch buys the London newspapers *The Times* and the *Sunday Times*.
- 1981** Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer are married.
- 1981** There are assassination attempts on President Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II.
- 1982** Argentina invades the Falkland Islands; in April, Thatcher sends troops to reclaim the islands and, by June, they are successful.
- 1982** The movies *E.T.* and *This is Spinal Tap* are released, Michael Frayn's play *Noises Off* opens, and Michael Jackson's "Thriller" album comes out.
- 1983** President Reagan announces the U.S. defense plan known as "Star Wars."
- 1984** The National Union of Mineworkers starts a year-long coal strike in England; Thatcher, though, had stockpiled coal and the miners (many lived in northern England) were forced to return to work without concessions

- 1984** The Irish Republican Army plants two bombs at the Grand Hotel in Brighton, England, during the Conservative Party Meeting; no one is injured.
- 1984** An all-star group of musicians record together as “Band Aid” to raise money for famine relief in Africa.
- 1985** The British Antarctic Survey discovers a hole in the ozone.
- 1985** Mikhail Gorbachev is elected general secretary of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union; he quickly calls for greater openness both in within the Soviet Union and the world community as well as new economic policies under the terms *glasnost* and *perestroika*.
- 1986** The space shuttle Challenger explodes, killing the seven crew members.
- 1986** The Chernobyl nuclear power plant accident occurs in the Ukraine; it still is considered the worst nuclear power plant accident in history.
- 1987** *Talking Heads*, a series of monologues by Alan Bennett, airs on the BBC.
- 1987** “Black Monday” occurs; on October 19, the Dow Jones Average drops 22.6 percent.
- 1988** Thatcher proposes a Community Charge, a fixed individual tax to fund local government, which is tremendously unpopular; she is ultimately will be ousted by her party and John Major will become prime minister.
- 1988** Stephen Hawking, the British theoretical physicist, publishes *A Brief History of Time*.
- 1988** Pan Am Flight103 explodes over Lockerbie, Scotland, destroyed by a bomb; 270 people die, 259 on the plane and 11 on the ground.
- 1989** 96 are killed at the football match between Liverpool FC and Nottingham Forest FC in Sheffield when Liverpool supporters are crushed into a retaining fence; the tragedy, known as the Hillsborough Disaster, occurs just before the start of the semifinal game for the Football Association Challenge Cup (commonly called the FA Cup) as fans rushed to get into the stadium.
- 1989** The Berlin Wall falls.
- 1989** Student protestors in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, China are massacred.

Margaret Thatcher's Britain

“I'm extraordinarily patient, provided I get my own way.”

— *Margaret Thatcher*



Margaret Thatcher

Margaret Thatcher was elected prime minister in 1979, the first woman to hold this post.

Even before her election she was a polarizing figure in British politics. As secretary of state for education and science, she eliminated free milk in schools as part of a budget cut; for this, she was branded by *The Sun* as “Maggie Thatcher, milk snatcher.” She, though, preferred the “Iron Lady,” the nickname given to her by the Soviet newspaper *The Red Star* after a 1976 speech on the policies of the Soviet Union.

Thatcher is best known for the war in the Falkland Islands, the National Union of Mineworker's Strike, her close Cold War-relationship with the United States and being ousted by her own party in 1990.

On April 2, 1982, Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands. Thatcher dispatched the British Navy to the islands, and 11 weeks later Argentina surrendered. National outrage at the invasion and satisfaction at the successful conclusion of the war would contribute to her landslide reelection in 1983.

In 1984, the National Union of Mineworkers started what would become a yearlong strike. Thatcher was committed to reducing union power and stockpiled coal before the strike. Consequently, electric power was not disrupted during the strike, and the miners ultimately were forced to return to work without gaining any concessions.

Thatcher's fall from power was the result of the 1988 Community Charge, a tax levied to fund local governments. Essentially a tiered poll tax (a fixed tax on a per-individual basis), it took effect in 1990. The tax was highly unpopular, and the Conservative Party feared certain defeat in the next election if Thatcher remained the party's leader. Under pressure from her party, she resigned Nov. 22, 1990.

Thatcher took a particular interest in the British university system. In 1980 funding was slashed and many academics were simply asked to resign by their institutions. The 1988 Education Reform Act put further pressure on universities, which Thatcher had accused of “pushing out poison.” Thatcher's secretary of state for education and science, Keith Joseph had argued in his 1985 “White Paper” on higher education the need to “bring higher-education institutions closer to the world of business.” Two provisions of this centralization of educational policy were that schools wanting government funding had to commit to the introduction of a national curriculum and the publication of “league tables,” a comparison of school examination results.

Thatcherism, as the policies of the prime minister came to be known, was defined by a strong but small central government, weakening the role of regional government, weakened trade unions, promotion of private enterprise, privatization of government-owned companies, dismantling of welfare programs and strong nationalism. She viewed her policies as an overdue correction of the Labour and Social Democratic plans that had expanded government. Thatcherism also was marked by a strong sense of ideology as the driving factor in her policy decisions. This ideology was one she shared on almost every point with President Ronald Reagan, with whom she shared an incredibly close working relationship. The term also is used to refer to her autocratic style of governing.

Translations of the French Scenes

Alan Bennett begins the play in French and there is an entire scene performed in French. Part of the brilliance of the play is that the scene becomes intelligible when depicted on stage even for the audience member who does not understand French. However, for convenience, translations of the French scenes are included below.

Beginning of the Play

Les gants – gloves

L'écharpe – scarf

Le blouson d'aviateur – aviator's jacket

Le casque – helmet

Permettez-moi, monsieur. — Allow me, sir

Bien fait, mes enfants. Bien fait. — Well done, my children. Well done.

Hector's General Studies Lesson

Hector: Where would you like to work this afternoon?

Rudge: In a garage.

Boys: No, No

Sripps: Not again. Have pity on us.

Hector: Dakin, Where would you like today?

Dakin: I would like to work . . . in a masion de passé.

Hector: Oo-la-la

Boys: What is that?

What is a masion de passe?

Posner: A brothel

Hector: Very well. But a brothel where all the clients use the subjunctive or the conditional tense, yes?

See there, a client already.

Who is the chamber maid?

Posner: Me. I am the chamber maid.

Hector: What are you called?

Posner: I am called Simone.
 Akthar: Simone, the gentleman must not be kept waiting.
 Posner: Hello, sir.
 Dakin: Hello, my dear.
 Posner: Come in, please.
 Here is your bed and here is your prostitute
 Hector: Oh, here one calls a cat a cat.
 Dakin: Thank you madame.
 Posner: Mademoiselle
 Dakin: I want to stretch out on the bed.
 Hector: I would like to stretch out on the bed in the conditional or the
 subjunctive
 Posner: But the shoes sir, not on the bed. And your pants if you please.
 Dakin: Excuse me, miss.
 Posner: Oh what beautiful legs.
 Dakin: Watch it.
 Posner: And now, Claudine.
 Dakin: Yes, the prostitute, please.
 Crowther: Sir, I would think that you would like some preliminaries
 Dakin: Which preliminaries
 Posner: Claudine, What preliminaries are on the menu?
 Timms: At what price?
 Dakin: Ten francs.
 Timms: Ten francs? For ten francs I could show you my prodigious breasts.
 Dakin: And now, if I could caress the breast?
 Timms: That will cost you fifteen francs. For twenty francs you could
 place your mouth on my breast and agitate. . .
 Lockwood: Agitate what? (there is a knock)
 Posner: Another client?
 Hector: Ah, dear headmaster
 Headmaster: Mr. Hector, I hope I'm not
 Hector: English is forbidden. Here one speaks nothing but French,
 giving particular importance to the subjunctive.
 Headmaster: Oh ah. And what is going on here? Why is this boy, Dakin, isn't
 it, without his trousers?
 Hector: Anyone? Don't be shy. Tell our dear headmaster what you are doing.
 Dakin: I am a man who. . .
 Hector: You are not a man. You are a soldier, a wounded soldier; you
 understand dear Headmaster a wounded soldier?
 Headmaster: Wounded soldier, of course, yes.
 Hector: This is a hospital in Belgium.
 Headmaster: Belgium, Why Belgium?
 Akthar: At Ypres sir. Ypres. During World War I.
 Hector: It is so. Dakin is a wounded soldier, one mutilated by the war
 and the others are the doctors and orderlies, and all the
 personnel of a large medical and therapeutic establishment.
 Continue my children.

Headmaster: But . . .
 Akthar: How he suffers!
 Lockwood: My mother. My mother!
 Akthar: He calls for his mother.
 Lockwood: My father! My father!
 Akthar: He calls for his father!
 Lockwood: My aunt!
 Headmaster: His aunt?
 Timms: The whole family.
 Hector: He is distracted. He is distracted.
 Irwin: He is shell-shocked perhaps?
 Hector: What?
 Irwin: Commotionné. Shell-shocked.
 Hector: It is possible. Commotionné. Yes that is the right word.
 Headmaster: Allow me to introduce Mr. Irwin, our new teacher.
 Hector: Enchanted.
 Headmaster: What I want. . .
 Hector: What I would like. . .
 Headmaster: Would like. Enough of this silliness, not silliness, no but Mr. Hector, you are aware that these pupils are Oxbridge candidates.

* * *

Hector: I, too. No, absolutely not. No. No. No. No, it is out of the question. And now if you will excuse me, I must continue the lesson. Until later.

Glossary

In addition, to the scenes in French and numerous literary references, Bennett also uses a number of large words and words that may be unfamiliar to Americans.

Accessions Desk – Library Circulation Desk

St. Aelred – (1109-1166) Abbot of Rievaulx Abbey

Age Concern – Large charity in the UK for the welfare of aging citizens

A-levels – A-level is short for the Advanced Level of the General Certificate of Education (GCE) qualification in Britain. A-level examinations are taken after the two final, optional, years of education. A-levels are taken in a variety of subjects and admittance to a University is based on the scores and subjects.

Apotheosis – the perfect example

Archbishop of Canterbury – the head of the Church of England

Arsenal Scarf – A scarf supporting the Arsenal football team

Battery chicken – a caged chicken kept for laying eggs

BBC 2 – Launched in 1967 as a television station for British Broadcasting Corporation's more ambitious programming

Box of Black Magic – Nestlé brand high-end chocolates

CV – the abbreviation of the Latin curriculum vitae meaning “course of life.” Like a resume it outlines individual academic achievement, “cheats visa” is Hector's pun on the abbreviation.

Cenotaph – A cenotaph is a memorial for those whose remains are elsewhere. The Cenotaph referred to here is the one in London erected in 1919 inscribed with “The Glorious dead” words chosen by Rudyard Kipling.

Cistercian – A monastic order founded on the Rule of St. Benedict as interpreted by St. Bernard of Clairvaux. There are two suborders of the strict (Trappists) and common observance (Cistersians).

Compound adjective – formed when two or more adjectives are put together to modify the same noun for example homemade or in the case of the Hardy poem quoted in the play uncoffined

Dales – The Yorkshire dales are rolling hills in the North of England known for their beauty

Decorum – Appropriateness of behavior or conduct; propriety

Decrepitude – the state of being decrepit, weakened or wasted by old age

Doncaster – a city in Northern England just north of Sheffield

Dons – A head tutor or fellow at Oxford or Cambridge

Diffidence – hesitant, lacking self-confidence

Dumfries – a town in Scotland

Elastoplast – a British brand name of adhesive bandages or plasters; the American equivalent would be Band-Aid.

Eponymous – Of the same name, in this case the navel orange

Ethos – distinguishing character

Euphemism – The substitution of an inoffensive or indirect expression for one that may cause offense

Exhibition – a merit scholarship, the amount is less than a scholarship

Fiddling – British slang for fondling the genitals

Fifty p – short for 50 pence

Gap year – taking a year off to travel, generally before the start of university or the year after completing a university degree.

Gerund – A gerund is a verb that ends in *-ing* and functions as a noun.

Give him the Money, Barney – Phrase introduced by Wilfred Pickles in the long running radio broadcast “Have A Go.” Barney referred to Barney Colehan who was a producer for BBC in the North and gave money away as prizes on general knowledge quizzes.

Gobbets – a mouthful, morsel or lump; in the play the gobbets refer to the quotations being used in essays and there seems a method of applying these sources at Oxford

Hecatombs – Large scale sacrifice or slaughter, originally Greek or Roman slaughter of 100 cattle or oxen

Histrionics – Theatrical performances, deliberate display of emotion for effect

Hun – Disparaging slang for Germans used especially during World War I

Impinge – Encroach or infringe, to make an impact

Incorrigible – Incapable of being amended, unruly, delinquent, unalterable

Inexpedient – Not expedient; inadvisable

Je divague – French for I am rambling or I digress

Kitty – a pot or pool of money generally for a card game

League Tables – A chart for comparing or ranking sports teams, or in this case schools

Matins – Morning prayer, originally part of the series of hours of prayer: Matins, Lauds, Vespers, etc. In the context of the play would mark Scripps religious observance as being “high church” for the Church of England and be an additional service Scripps is attending.

Nancy – British, negative slang for a homosexual man

National Front – A British right wing political organization formed in 1967 from other political groups who shared an anti-immigration, racist fear of the impact of immigrants on England as well as fears about communism and capitalism. A strong proponent of nationalism, they opposed both NATO and the UN. In short, Irwin’s assertion that Orwell would have been a member of the National Front is contrary to all of Orwell’s anti-totalitarian and anti-racist writing.

National Gallery – The national art museum in London on Trafalgar Square. It houses a large collection of European paintings, mostly Medieval to the early 19th Century

Off your own bat – to do something without being told; slang probably has its origins in cricket

On stream – British slang for on line, on track

Open Prison – A low-security prison

Otiose – futile, lacking use or effect

Oxbridge – Originally used as a fictional university – a combination of Oxford and Cambridge, it is now used to refer to the schools collectively.

Pass the parcel – a children's game in which music is played and when it stops the person holding the parcel is allowed to take a layer off; when the music starts the parcel must be passed again. The person who removes the last layer gets to keep the present.

Pillion – A secondary pad beyond the main seat of a motorcycle.

Purse – in UK like a wallet but with a place for holding coins

Push the boat out – To spend more than one is normally accustomed to doing, often to mark a special occasion

Mr. Quelches – Likely refers to Mr. Quelch in the Billy Bunter serial first published in 1908 by Charles Hamilton under the pen name Frank Richards. The series follows the schoolboy adventures of Billy Bunter. Mr. Quelch was the master at the school known for hitting his pupils.

Quid pro quo – Something given or received for something else — direct trade

Reconnoitered – To explore with the goal of finding something or somebody

Renaissance Man – An individual who excels in multiple fields

Reports to the Governors – the governors of the school are like a school board to whom the Headmaster would be answerable.

Reredorter – A Latrine attached to the abbey, generally involving some water mechanics to move the waste away from the abbey and yet not pollute drinking water.

Rievaulx Abbey – In North Yorkshire, a Cistercian Abbey, founded by St. Bernard of Clairvaux

Roche Abbey – The ruins of twelfth-century Roche Abbey lie in the wooded valley of the Maltby Beck, about 9 miles from Doncaster and 13 miles from Sheffield in South Yorkshire. During the reign of Henry VIII, the abbey was dissolved, the monks dispersed and the abbey buildings destroyed.

Rugger – a nickname for the sport of rugby

Sheffield – City in the north of England

Shrunken violets – derisive slang for homosexuals. Here the Headmaster is referring to Plato, Michelangelo and Oscar Wilde, all of whom were known to be or believed to be homosexuals.

Snogged – British slang for kissed

Sod – Mildly offensive slang in the UK derived from sodomites but not retaining the sexual connotations in the insult

The Spectator – British weekly political and literary magazine founded in 1828

The Statesman – A liberal British newspaper

Subjunctive – is a verb tense used for talking about events that are not certain to happen

Supply Teacher – A temporary or substitute teacher generally brought in to fill a vacancy

Tact – Acute sensitivity to what is proper and appropriate in dealing with others, including the ability to speak or act without offending.

Takeaway – British for takeout food

Tot – generally slang for a small child or a small amount of liquor

Totty – formerly slang for a prostitute in the 1800s

Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner – a French proverb meaning to understand all is to forgive all. Rudge quotes this during the discussion of the Holocaust.

Travel on the other bus – a euphemism for homosexuality

Trollop – A vulgar or disreputable woman, especially one who engages in sex for money

Trouble at t'mill – Literally means trouble at the mill but in a northern or Lancashire dialect

Twat – fathead, jackass, originally slang for female genitalia

The Unknown Soldier – A symbolic tomb set up to honor soldiers whose bodies were not recovered during a war, often containing the remains of an unidentified soldier. The modern trend was started when a soldier of World War I was buried in Westminster Abbey in 1920.

Vertiginous – dizzying, causing vertigo

Wank – British slang for masturbation

West Riding – A historic subdivision of Yorkshire in the North of England

Won the pools – Won the lottery or the football pool

Yorkshire – County in the North of England

Literary References

In general, Hector, the English Master, seems to prefer noted poets, but not always the most famous. Most were men, and many were homosexual. Hector is particularly fond of the poetry of the World War I, perhaps because those poets were bright young men not prepared for what the future might hold, much like the boys he teaches. Below are the literary references in the play with brief biographies of the authors mentioned and the work or an excerpt of a work the quotation was drawn from if the author was quoted.

W.H. Auden (1907 –1973)

Wystan Hugh Auden read English literature at Christ Church, Oxford. His talent was apparent while he was at Oxford, and, by 1930, he was a leading voice in poetry. He is known for his skill in a variety of poetic forms and subject, as well as his wit and ability to mimic other poets. His best-known work today is “Funeral Blues,” which starts with the line “Stop all the clocks,” which has been quoted widely in film and the media.

I hate the modern trick, to tell the truth,
Of straightening out the kinks in the young mind,
Our passion for the tender plant of youth,
Our hatred for all weeds of any kind.
Slogans are bad: the best that I can find
Is this: ‘Let each child have that’s in our care
As much neurosis as the child can bear.’
— from “*Letter to Lord Byron*”

Hector quotes this to Lintott, who dismisses it by asking how many children Auden had.

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters; how well, they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.
In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen

Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.
— “*Musée des Beaux Arts*”

The poem refers to a painting by Breughel which depicts the Greek myth of Icarus, the son of Daedalus, who flew too close to the sun with his wax wings which melted and he fell into the sea. In the Breughel painting Icarus is a small figure in the corner of the painting and the ordinary citizens take prominence. Timms quotes the line in a scene with Mr. Irwin when they are discussing painters.

“Art is our chief means of breaking bread with the dead.”
— Auden, quoted in *The New York Times*, August 7, 1971

Hector quotes this line from Auden about what the boys are meant to be doing in his classroom and what it means to read poetry.

Lay your sleeping head, my love,
Human on my faithless arm;
Time and fevers burn away
Individual beauty from
Thoughtful children, and the grave
Proves the child ephemeral:
But in my arms till break of day
Let the living creature lie,
Mortal, guilty, but to me
The entirely beautiful.

Soul and body have no bounds:
To lovers as they lie upon
Her tolerant enchanted slope
In their ordinary swoon,
Grave the vision Venus sends
Of supernatural sympathy,
Universal love and hope;
While an abstract insight wakes
Among the glaciers and the rocks
The hermit's carnal ecstasy.
- *From “Lullaby”*

Dakin quotes this poem to Mr. Irwin to point out that Auden wrote it for one of his pupils and to see if he can discomfit Mr. Irwin.

The Bible

“Stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.”
— *Proverbs 9:17 King James Version*

“This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live”
— *Deuteronomy 30:19 King James Version*

Mr. Hector quotes the Proverbs when he is describing the pact he has in his classroom as “bread eaten in secret,” and the quote from Deuteronomy he uses when he is urging the boys to go to schools other than Oxford and Cambridge.

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.” — *Revelation 30:20 King James Version*

Scripps quotes Revelation in the scene in which Mr. Hector asks the boys to list knocks at the door in literature.

Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821)

The first Emperor of France, who rose to power during the first French Republic.

“We are a nation of shoplifters” is quoted by Akthar in the play; it may be a variation on a quotation attributed to Napoleon calling England a nation of shopkeepers.

The Book of Common Prayer

The Prayer Book of the Church of England.

Rupert Brooke (1887-1915)

Rupert Brooke was a poet prior to World War I and counted numerous friends in literary circles including E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf. Brooke contracted blood poisoning from a small neglected injury during service in World War I and died in April 1915, in the Aegean. Brooke's reputation rests on five sonnets about the war, which he wrote in 1914, and a few early pieces of poetry. In part, his reputation was secured by his literary friends and the tragedy of the death of a talented and good-looking young man at an early age.

THE SOLDIER

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.
And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.
— *From “1914”*

Posner compares “There’s some corner of a foreign field/In that rich earth a richer dust concealed” with Hardy in the scene in which he discusses “Drummer Hodge” with Mr. Hector.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)

Samuel Taylor Coleridge is one of the British Romantic poets. He was friends with William Wordsworth. His best known poems are “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and “Kubla Khan.”

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round:
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.
But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momently was forced:
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:
And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momently the sacred river.
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:
And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war!
The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves;
Where was heard the mingled measure
From the fountain and the caves.
It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!
A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssinian maid,
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive within me

Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.
– “*Kubla Khan*”

In the play Hector asks the boys to think of knocks at the door that occur in literature and Akthar suggests “the person from Porlock,” which refers to Coleridge’s assertion that he was interrupted by a person from Porlock while writing his poem, “Kubla Khan,” and that interruption caused him to lose his train of thought and not finish the poem.

Frances Cornford (1886-1960)

Cornford was born and lived for most of her life in Cambridge. She was the granddaughter of Charles Darwin, and on her mother’s side was related to William Wordsworth. She married the classicist Francis Cornford, who was to become Professor of Ancient Philosophy at Cambridge in 1901, and they had five children. Frances Cornford published eight books of poetry and two of translations. In 1959 she was awarded the Queen’s Gold Medal for Poetry.

A young Apollo, golden-haired,
Stands dreaming on the verge of strife,
Magnificently unprepared
For the long littleness of life.
– “*On Rupert Brooke*”

Hector quotes this passage during the school photograph and it is an appropriate if cynical way for him to describe the boys.

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965)

Thomas Stearns Eliot is an American Modernist Poet who settled in England and became a British citizen. He is known for *The Wasteland*, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and his whimsical *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*. He won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1948.

“A painter of the Umbrian School
Designed upon a gesso ground
The nimbus of the Baptised God
The wilderness is cracked and browned.
But through the water pale and thin
Still shine the unoffending feet

And there above the painter set
The Father and the Paraclete”
— from “*Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service*”

Scripps has Dakin quiz him on this portion of the poem, which refers to a painting in the National Gallery by the Italian Painter Piero della Francesca.

Thou hast nor youth nor age
But as it were an after dinner sleep
Dreaming of both.
Here I am, an old man in a dry month,
Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.
— from “*Gerontion*,” *Gerontion* means “old man” in Greek

Hector quotes, “I am an old man in a dry month,” after he has wept in front of the boys.

Kenneth Grahame (1859 – 1932)

Grahame was a Scottish essayist best known for his beloved children’s book, *The Wind in the Willows*, which follows the adventures of Rat, Mole, Mr. Badger and the erratic Mr. Toad.

Hector quotes the character of Mr. Toad in Chapter two of Grahame’s famous children’s classic *The Wind in the Willows*, “The Open road, the dusty highway. Travel, change, interest, excitement. Poop. Poop.” It is not unlike the “tosh” that Mr. Hector gives the boys at other points in the play except that at this juncture it takes on a melancholy air.

Robert Graves (1895-1985)

Graves had a lengthy career as a literary scholar, poet, novelist and translator. He fought in World War I as an officer in the Royal Welch Fusiliers. He was injured during the Somme offensive in 1916 and again in 1918. Though traumatized by the war he built a career at St. John’s College, Oxford, and was a friend and colleague to many notable writers, including W. H. Auden. He may be best known for his novels *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God and His Wife Messalina*.

The bugler sent a call of high romance
“Lights out! Lights out!” to the deserted square.
On the thin brazen notes he threw a prayer:
“God, if it’s *this* for me next time in France,
O spare the phantom bugle as I lie
Dead in the gas and smoke and roar of guns,
Dead in a row with other broken ones,
Lying so stiff and still under the sky—
Jolly young Fusiliers, too good to die. . .”
The music ceased, and the red sunset flare
Was blood about his head as he stood there.
— “*The Last Post*,” *the last post is the final bugle call
played at military funerals*

The last post is mentioned by Irwin in a series of memorials to the fallen soldiers of World War I.

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

Hardy was an English poet and novelist. His novels include *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, which aroused public outcry because of their salacious content, according to Victorian standards. Late in life Hardy turned to writing poetry, which he claimed to enjoy more than his novels.

They throw in Drummer Hodge, to rest
 Uncoffined, -just as found:
His landmark is a kopje-crest
 That breaks the veldt around;
And foreign constellations west
 Each night above his mound.

Young Hodge the Drummer never knew--
 Fresh from his Wessex home--
The meaning of the broad Karoo,
 The Bush, the dusty loam,
And why uprose to nightly view
 Strange stars amid the gloam.

Yet portion of that unknown plain
 Will Hodge for ever be;
His homely Northern breast and brain
 Grow to some Southern tree,
And strange-eyed constellations reign
 His stars eternally.
— “*Drummer Hodge*”

This is the poem Posner has memorized and recites for Mr. Hector in their tutorial. It is significant that Posner and Hector mirror the approximate ages of Hardy when he wrote the poem and the age of the Hodge in the poem. Kopje-crest is the Boer word for a small hill, veldt is a word for an African prairie and Karoo is a South African plain.

A.E. Housman (1859 –1936)

Alfred Edward Housman is known as one of the best poets of the British countryside. He was educated at St. John's College, Oxford. After university, while working as a civil servant, he published as a classicist. He ultimately earned himself a position as professor of Latin, first at University College, London, then at Cambridge. His style combines his knowledge of the classical ode and the English ballad tradition. He published his first volume of poetry, *A Shropshire Lad*, at his own expense. It sold slowly at first but soon became a favorite, and he was well known before World War I started. Though his poems often focus on the landscape, they are often written in the various voices of young men and their concerns and frustrations as they wander in that landscape.

“All knowledge is precious whether or not it serves the slightest human use.”

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough,
And stands about the woodland ride
Wearing white for Eastertide

Now, of my threescore years and ten,
Twenty will not come again,
And take from seventy springs a score
It only leaves me fifty more.

And since to look at things in bloom
Fifty springs are little room,
About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.
— “Poem II” from “A Shropshire Lad”

There, like the wind through woods in riot,
Through him the gale of life blew high;
The tree of man was never quiet:
Then ’twas the Roman, now ’tis I.

The gale, it plies the saplings double,
It blows so hard, ’twill soon be gone:
To-day the Roman and his trouble
Are ashes under Uricon.
— “Poem XXXI” from A Shropshire Lad

Hymns Ancient and Modern

The prayer book and hymnal used by the Church of England. This is the book that Scripps mentions; Hector calls him a lucky boy for getting to read *Hymns Ancient and Modern*.

Franz Kafka (1883-1924)

Kafka was born in Prague and is best known for his novels *The Metamorphosis*, *The Trial* and *The Castle*. He excelled at creating nightmarish worlds for his central characters and has been an influence on the genres of modernism and magical realism.

“Someone must have been telling lies about Josef K., he knew he had done nothing wrong but, one morning, he was arrested. Every day at eight in the morning he was brought his breakfast by Mrs. Grubach's cook — Mrs. Grubach was his landlady — but today she didn't come. That had never happened before. K. waited a little while, looked from his pillow at the old woman who lived opposite and who was watching him with an inquisitiveness quite unusual for her, and finally, both hungry and disconcerted, rang the bell. There was immediately a knock at the door and a man entered.” — *The Trial*

The trial is mentioned in the play in the scene about knocks at the door in literature and again when Crowther suggests jokingly that he believes Kafka was good at table tennis.

John Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)

Bombay-born British author best known for his *Just So Stories* and *The Jungle Book*. He was active in encouraging British involvement in World War I and helped his 17-year-old son Jack get a commission in the Irish Guards in spite of his poor vision. Jack was killed at the Battle of Loos and his body never recovered. Kipling was overcome with grief and remorse which appears in his poetry after the death of his son.

If any question why we die,
Tell them because our fathers lied.

This passage quoted by Irwin in the play was written after the death of his son Jack in World War I.

To the legion of the lost ones, to the cohort of the damned,
To my brethren in their sorrow overseas,
Sings a gentleman of England cleanly bred, machinely crammed,
And a trooper of the Empress, if you please.
Yea, a trooper of the forces who has run his own six horses,
And faith he went the pace and went it blind,
And the world was more than kin while he held the ready tin,
But to-day the Sergeant's something less than kind.
We're poor little lambs who've lost our way,
Baa! Baa! Baa!
We're little black sheep who've gone astray,
Baa-aa-aa!
Gentlemen-rankers out on the spree,
Damned from here to Eternity,
God ha' mercy on such as we,
Baa! Yah! Bah!
Oh, it's sweet to sweat through stables, sweet to empty kitchen slops,
And it's sweet to hear the tales the troopers tell,
To dance with blowzy housemaids at the regimental hops
And thrash the cad who says you waltz too well.
Yes, it makes you cock-a-hoop to be "Rider" to your troop,
And branded with a blasted worsted spur,
When you envy, O how keenly, one poor Tommy being cleanly
Who blacks your boots and sometimes calls you "Sir".
If the home we never write to, and the oaths we never keep,
And all we know most distant and most dear,
Across the snoring barrack-room return to break our sleep,
Can you blame us if we soak ourselves in beer?
When the drunken comrade mutters and the great guard-lantern gutters
And the horror of our fall is written plain,

Every secret, self-revealing on the aching white-washed ceiling,
 Do you wonder that we drug ourselves from pain?
 We have done with Hope and Honour, we are lost to Love and Truth,
 We are dropping down the ladder rung by rung,
 And the measure of our torment is the measure of our youth.
 God help us, for we knew the worst too young!
 Our shame is clean repentance for the crime that brought the sentence,
 Our pride it is to know no spur of pride,
 And the Curse of Reuben holds us till an alien turf enfolds us
 And we die, and none can tell Them where we died.
 We're poor little lambs who've lost our way,
 Baa! Baa! Baa!
 We're little black sheep who've gone astray,
 Baa-aa-aa!
 Gentlemen-rankers out on the spree,
 Damned from here to Eternity,
 God ha' mercy on such as we,
 Baa! Yah! Bah!
 – *“The Gentlemen Rankers”*

This poem is quoted by Timms in a class with Irwin. The line “till an alien turf enfolds us” is like the Hardy poem “Drummer Hodge” quoted elsewhere in the play.

Philip Larkin (1922 –1985)

Like Bennett, Philip Larkin was born in northern England. He attended St. John's College, Oxford, and graduated with first-class honors in English Language and Literature. He wrote poetry at Oxford and throughout his life. He was a librarian at several universities before becoming the librarian at the University of Hull. He also wrote reviews of jazz for various periodicals. His poetry is known for its formal structure, but his subjects are real, accessible, sometimes unpleasant and raw.

Those long uneven lines
 Standing as patiently
 As if they were stretched outside
 The Oval or Villa Park,
 The crowns of hats, the sun
 On moustached archaic faces
 Grinning as if it were all
 An August Bank Holiday lark;
 And the shut shops, the bleached
 Established names on the sunblinds,
 The farthings and sovereigns,
 And dark-clothed children at play
 Called after kings and queens,
 The tin advertisements
 For cocoa and twist, and the pubs
 Wide open all day;
 And the countryside not caring

The place-names all hazed over
With flowering grasses, and fields
Shadowing Domesday lines
Under wheats' restless silence;
The differently-dressed servants
With tiny rooms in huge houses,
The dust behind limousines;
Never such innocence,
Never before or since,
As changed itself to past
Without a word--the men
Leaving the gardens tidy,
The thousands of marriages
Lasting a little while longer:
Never such innocence again.
— *"MCMXIV"*

Scripps and the boys quote this poem to Mr. Irwin. It is significant that the title of the poem translates to "1914," as the poem through its mundane imagery depicts the loss of innocence that occurred to the British after World War I.

When I see a couple of kids
And guess he's fucking her and she's
Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,
I know this is paradise

Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives—
Bonds and gestures pushed to one side
Like an outdated combine harvester,
And everyone young going down the long slide

To happiness, endlessly. I wonder if
Anyone looked at me, forty years back,
And thought, That'll be the life;
No God any more, or sweating in the dark

About hell and that, or having to hide
What you think of the priest. He
And his lot will all go down the long slide
Like free bloody birds. And immediately

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.
— *"High Windows"*

Timms quotes the line "everyone going down the long slide to happiness" in a scene with Mr. Irwin.

John Milton (1608-1674)

Milton was a poet, author and civil servant in 17th Century England. His *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* along with *Aeropagitica* secure his reputation as one of the most talented writers of the 17th Century.

Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail
Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt,
Dispraise, or blame, nothing but well and fair,
And what may quiet us in a death so noble.
Let us go find the body where it lies'
— from “*Samson Agonistes*”

Mr. Hector quotes “Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail” after he has wept in front of the boys.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)

Friedrich Nietzsche was a 19th Century German philosopher and philologist. His influence in literature, art psychology and sociology is substantial, particularly in existentialism and postmodernism. He questioned the underpinnings of Christianity, traditional morality.

In *The History Boys*, Dakin has been reading Nietzsche and trying out some of his ideas on art as consolation but he has also mispronounced Nietzsche in front of one of his masters.

George Orwell (1903-1950)

George Orwell was the pseudonym of Eric Arthur Blair. He was a journalist, essayist and novelist who is known for his novels *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Orwell was critical of racism and nationalism as is shown in his dystopian satires.

Orwell is mentioned by Irwin both directly and indirectly in Rudge’s notes on his lecture. It is ironic and an example of Irwin’s ability to turn an argument on its head that he suggests that Orwell would have written about the campy *Carry On* films or would be a member of the right wing and racist National Front. Mr. Hector also mentions Orwell when he chastises Lockwood for using the abbreviation “etc.” when referring to the Holocaust.

Wilfred Owen (1893 –1918)



Wilfred Owen

After failing to be admitted to the University of London, Wilfred Owen taught English at the Berlitz school in Bordeaux, France. While there he saw the magnitude of the build up to World War I. He returned to England and enlisted in September 1915. His regiment was posted to France in January 1917, and at one point it was ordered to hold a flooded trench in no man’s land; they were bombarded for 50 hours before they received reinforcements. Injured in a shell explosion, he was diagnosed as having neurasthenia, or “shell shock,” and evacuated to Craiglockhart War Hospital in

Edinburgh, Scotland. While there, he wrote much of his poetry and was mentored by Siegfried Sassoon, a more well-known poet, who offered to look at his poetry. Owen returned to his regiment in 1918. He was killed Nov. 4, while attempting to lead his troops across the Sambre Canal at Ors in northern France, seven days prior to the armistice that ended the war.

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie; Dulce et Decorum est
Pro patria mori.

—From “*Dulce et Decorum Est*” (The Latin is from an ode by Horace; it translates as “It is sweet and right to die for one’s country”)

Irwin mentions Wilfred Owen in relationship to the First World War. In an example of Irwin’s technique of turning an argument around he suggests that Wilfred Owen was a good soldier who enjoyed the war in contrast to the horror expressed in his poetry.

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662)

Pascal was a French scientist, mathematician and philosopher. In addition to his contributions in math and science, he converted to Jansenism and was known for his writings as a Christian apologist in *Pensées*, which translates as “Thoughts.”

“The heart has its reasons that reason knoweth not” is from *Pensées* and is quoted by Lockwood when the boys are challenging Irwin’s teaching method.

Plato (429-347 B.C.)

Plato was a Greek philosopher, student of Socrates is, by any reckoning, one of the most influential authors Western literature and philosophy.

Plato is mentioned by the Headmaster, who is listing a series of writers and artists who are known to be or believed to be homosexual when he is criticizing Hector.

Marcel Proust (1871-1922)

French author famous for his groundbreaking, long, semi-autobiographical novel *The Remembrance of Things Past*.

Scripps, who hopes to be a writer, says that he hopes any scarring in his youth will turn him into Proust.

J.D. Salinger (1919-)

The reclusive American Author is best known for *The Catcher in the Rye*, a coming of age novel in which the main character, Holden Caulfield, who has been kicked out of another private school, flees in the middle of the night for New York City and for his series of stories about the Glass family.

Lintott mentions *The Catcher in the Rye* as one of those books teachers loved themselves as students and so they stick it on a syllabus and expect their students to love as well.

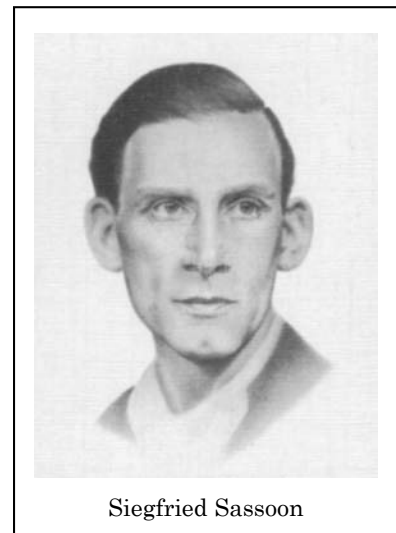
John Paul Sartre (1905-1980)

Sartre was a French Philosopher and playwright best know for *Being and Nothingness* and *No Exit*. He is intimately connected to the development of Existentialism.

Rudge mentions him at the end of his mock interview with the three masters and suggests that he knows about Sartre because he was a good golfer, but he is in fact lying to the teachers.

Siegfried Sassoon (1886 –1967)

Siegfried Sassoon was the son of a wealthy Jewish father and an Anglo-Catholic mother. He studied law and history at Clare College, Cambridge, but dropped out and spent his time hunting and writing poetry before entering military service during World War I. He earned the nickname “Mad Jack” from his regiment for his near-suicidal exploits, which were in part prompted by the death of his brother, Hamo, and his fellow officer David Thomas. In his anger at the progress of the war, he went public with his protest against it and the politicians in power. His friend and fellow poet Robert Graves convinced his military superiors he was suffering from “shell shock,” and he was sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital instead of a court martial. Sassoon was older and an established poet and of a higher social class than Owen, whom he mentored and introduced to other poets while he was at the hospital. He survived the war and spent many years reflecting on it in his writing. His later poetry was religious and he ultimately converted to Roman Catholicism. These poems are in sharp contrast to the angry, satiric criticism found in his war pieces.



I knew a simple soldier boy
Who grinned at life in empty joy,
Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,
And whistled early with the lark.

In winter trenches, cowed and glum,
With crumps and lice and lack of rum,
He put a bullet through his brain.
No one spoke of him again.

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
Sneak home and pray you'll never know
The hell where youth and laughter go.
—“*Suicide in the Trenches*”

With Wilfred Owen, Irwin suggests that Sassoon was enjoyed the war in contrast to his to his poetry. Owen and Sassoon are meaningful choices because their unpreparedness for the war is not unlike the unpreparedness of the students for the world ahead of them.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

Shakespeare was a British Renaissance playwright and poet who is widely regarded as the best writer in English literature. References to his plays and poetry are pervasive in the Western literary tradition.

Othello

Behold, I have a weapon;
A better never did itself sustain
Upon a soldier's thigh: I have seen the day,
That, with this little arm and this good sword,
I have made my way through more impediments
Than twenty times your stop: but, O vain boast!
Who can control his fate? 'tis not so now.
Be not afraid, though you do see me weapon'd;
Here is my journey's end, here is my butt,
And very sea-mark of my utmost sail.
Do you go back dismay'd? 'tis a lost fear;
Man but a rush against Othello's breast,
And he retires. Where should Othello go?
Now, how dost thou look now? O ill-starr'd wench!
Pale as thy smock! when we shall meet at compt,
This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven,
And fiends will snatch at it. Cold, cold, my girl!
Even like thy chastity. O cursed slave!
Whip me, ye devils,
From the possession of this heavenly sight!
Blow me about in winds! roast me in sulphur!
Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!
O Desdemona! Desdemona! dead!
Oh! Oh! Oh!

— Othello, *Othello*, William Shakespeare, Act V, Scene 2

Hector quotes “Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!” when he is chastising the boys for trying for Oxford and Cambridge. The portion he quotes is immediately after Othello has murdered Desdemona.

King Lear

Lear: And my poor fool is hang'd! No, no, no life!
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never!
Pray you undo this button. Thank you, sir.
Do you see this? Look on her! look! her lips!
Look there, look there! He dies.

Edgar: He faints! My lord, my lord!
 Kent: Break, heart; I prithee break!
 Edgar: Look up, my lord.
 Kent: Vex not his ghost. O, let him pass! He hates him
 That would upon the rack of this tough world
 Stretch him out longer.
 Edgar: He is gone indeed.
 Kent: The wonder is, he hath endur'd so long.
 He but usurp'd his life.
 — *King Lear*, Act V, Scene 3

At the opening of *The History Boys*, Hector and the boys act out a portion of *King Lear* right after Lear's death; also later in the play Dakin references being like Cordelia and saying nothing, which is from the opening of *King Lear*.

Hamlet
 "O villainy! Let the door be locked!
 Treachery! Seek it Out"
 — *Hamlet*, Act V, scene 2

This is Hamlet's line right after Gertrude has been poisoned.

Love's Labour's Lost
 "The words of Mercury are harsh after the songs of Apollo.
 You that way, we this way."
 — *Don Armado*, Act V, Scene 2

This refers to the messenger, who brings news of the death of the King of France interrupting the play of the 9 Worthies; Hector quotes it when he tells Dakin he will not be giving him a ride on the motorbike.

Antony and Cleopatra
 "Finish good lady, the bright day is done and we are for the dark"
 — *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act 5, Scene 2

This line is spoken by Cleopatra's servant Iras; it is quoted by Hector to encourage Lintott to finish.

Stevie Smith (1902 –1971)

Stevie Smith is one of only two female poets quoted in *The History Boys*. Born Florence Margaret Smith, she was nicknamed Stevie by a friend who thought she reminded him of the jockey Steve Donahue when she rode. She was educated at the North London Collegiate School for girls. She worked as a private secretary to Sir Neville Pearson and Sir Frank Newnes at Newnes Publishing Co. in London from 1923-1953. After her first attempt to publish her poems she was told to write a novel. She responded by writing *The Novel on Yellow Paper*, which was published in 1936.

She followed her novel with a volume of poems, *A Good Time Was Had By All* (1937), which she illustrated with sketches. Smith, who never married, lived with a favorite aunt, to whom she was deeply devoted. In contrast with other poets of the post-World War I era, Smith did not experiment with form and did not read other poets in an attempt to keep the uniqueness of her voice. She often wrote striking depictions of alienation, but her tone was humorous and often satiric as well.

England, you had better go,
There is nothing else that you ought to do,
You lump of survival value, you are too slow.

England, you have been here too long,
And the songs you sing are the songs you sung
On a braver day. Now they are wrong.
— *From "Voices Against England in the Night"*

Nobody heard him, the dead man,
But still he lay moaning:
I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning.

Poor chap, he always loved larking
And now he's dead
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,
They said.

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning
— *"Not Waving but Drowning"*

Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

Whitman was a quintessential early American poet most well known for his volume of poetry *Leaves of Grass*.

"The untold want by life and land ne'er granted
Now voyager, sail thou forth to seek and find."
— *Leaves of Grass*

Hector quotes these lines after Lockwood and Timms have done a scene from the film *Now Voyager*, which takes its title from the Whitman poem.

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900)

An Anglo Irish playwright, Wilde is known for the novella *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, his numerous plays including *The Importance of Being Ernest*, and his witty, oft-quoted aphorisms. He was arrested and charged with "gross indecency" for homosexual acts and served two years hard labor in Reading Jail.

The Headmaster mentions Oscar Wilde derisively in a series of homosexual authors and artists.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951)

Wittgenstein was a 20th Century Austrian philosopher. He studied at Cambridge with Bertrand Russell. He joined the Austrian Army during World War I and was captured in 1917 and spent a year as a prisoner of war, where he kept journals that would become the basis for his early work *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

“Whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent”
— “*Tractatus 7*”

“The world is everything that is the case”
— “*Tractatus 1*”

Both quotes in the play are from his early period in which he sought to apply logic to metaphysics. The passage from “Tractatus 7” is actually the end of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, after which he would abandon philosophy for a time and teach in a small village school. “Whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent” is quoted by Dakin and “The world is everything that is the case” is quoted by Lockwood.

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941)

Adeline Virginia Woolf was a British Novelist and Essayist. A member of the Bloomsbury group, she was Modernist writer and pioneered the “stream of consciousness” techniques in her novels *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*. She is also known for her seminal essay on women writers *A Room of One’s Own*. She committed suicide in 1941.

Dakin mentions that the room he stays in when interviewing at Oxford had a photograph of Virginia Woolf.

Historical References

World War I

Ypres, Belgium

During World War I, on April 22, 1915, the Germans dispensed Chlorine gas over the allied troops at Ypres, Belgium. Ypres was also hotly contested territory throughout the war and the site of numerous casualties.

Sir Douglas Haig (1861-1928)

Haig was the most controversial of the British generals in World War I. On December 15, 1915, Haig was appointed the new Commander in Chief of the British Home Forces. He was an old-fashioned general and called the machine gun over rated. He is most associated with the Battle of the Somme in which approximately 58,000 British troops were killed, one third of them on the first day of the offensive, and the battle of Passchendaele, which similarly resulted in extensive loss of life. His place in history is still debated by historians, many of whom feel his victories came at the expense of the lives of too many soldiers.

The Battle of Passchendaele (also known as the 3rd Battle of Ypres, 1917)

Sir Douglas Haig intended the third battle of Ypres to be a major offensive in Flanders, The first two battles of Ypres were launched by the Germans in 1914 and 1915. The offensive resulted in some gains, including the village of Passchendaele, but was by no means a success in terms of the cost of human lives. The British sustained approximately 310,000 casualties and the Germans 260,000 for an increase in several kilometers of territory.

The Battle of the Somme, 1916

This battle was the main Allied attack on the Western Front during 1916, famous chiefly on account of the loss of 58,000 British troops on the first day of the battle, July 1, 1916, which to this day remains a one-day record.

Western Front

The area portions of Belgium and Luxembourg invaded by Germany during World War I.

Treaty of Versailles

This treaty ended World War I but was badly received within Germany because of the heavy compensation to the allies which not only made the Germans take responsibility for the war and pay heavy reparations but also took German colonies and lands, effectively redrawing the map of Germany.

Ruhr and Rhineland

In 1923 and 1924 after the collapse of the Weimar Republic, French and Belgian troops occupied Ruhr and Rhineland in part to claim reparations on which the Weimar Republic had fallen behind on payment, and also the French wanted it as a buffer region between France and Germany.

The Weimar Republic (1918-1933)

Named for the city in which its constitution was drafted, the Weimar government, a democratic parliamentary system, existed in Germany after World War I and collapsed with the Great Depression and the German burden of war reparations. In 1930 the Nazi party won the election and took over the government and by 1933 the Nazi Regime had begun.

World War II

Josef Stalin (1879-1953)

Stalin was the leader of the Soviet Union who was key in the defeat of Nazism during World War II, but who also was a brutal dictator causing the deaths tens of millions in his own country.

Auschwitz

The location of a concentration camp in Poland run by the Germans during World War II, where up to 3 million people died through gas chambers, starvation camps and experiments.

Dachau

A German concentration camp located in southern Germany (Bavaria), first for political prisoners, but also for Jews during World War II.

Neville Chamberlain

Chamberlain served as British Prime Minister from 1937 to 1940. His administration is known for its policy of appeasement as Hitler was rising to power.

Winston Churchill

Churchill served as British Prime Minister from 1940 to 1945 and again between 1951 and 1955. He is known for his leadership during World War II.

Charles Wood the Second Earl of Halifax (1912-1980)

Wood was a British politician who almost became prime minister in 1940.

Bernard Montgomery

Montgomery was a Field Marshall during World War II, best known for the turn that happened at the battle of El Alamein in the Western Desert Campaign in North Africa.

Lt. General William Gott

Gott was Churchill's first choice for the position of Field Marshall; he was killed flying back from Cairo when a German plane shot down his plane.

Other Historical References

Thomas Becket

Beckett was Archbishop of Canterbury from 1162 to 1170; he is considered a saint and martyr by the Catholic Church. After a conflict with King Henry II over the rights of the church, Henry's knights murdered him in Canterbury Cathedral.

Henry the VIII (1491-1547)

The King of England, Henry married six times and broke with the Catholic Church, creating the Church of England and years of civil wars when the Church would not grant him a divorce from Catherine of Aragon so he could marry Anne Boleyn.

Dissolution of the Monasteries

After Henry VIII broke with the Catholic Church, creating the Church of England, he dissolved the monasteries, often violently, by granting the lands to nobility and destroying the abbeys and church buildings.

Post-imperial decline

The decline of England after a period of worldwide colonization, wealth and military power.

Zulu Wars

In 1879, after two years of bloody fighting, the British solidified their rule in South Africa and suppressed the Zulu tribe, which was under the leadership of the king Shaka. The Zulus desired self-rule and the war was part of the tradition of British Colonialism.

Boer Wars (1899-1902)

A series of wars between the British for the Dutch Boer regions of Transvaal and the Orange Free State in South Africa, which were rich in gold mines. Boers were descended mainly from Dutch Calvinist and French Huguenot settlers in South Africa and spoke Afrikaans.

Sir Lewis Bernstein Namier (1888-1960)

A prominent British historian at Manchester University known especially for his work on 18th and 19th Century Europe, but with work in many time periods. Namier was born in Poland to non-practising Jewish parents and moved to England in his late teens, entering Balliol College, Oxford, in 1908. He took British nationality in 1913.

Art References

Rembrandt van Rijn (1609-1669)

Dutch Painter

Francis Bacon (1909-1992)

Irish Expressionist Painter

Joseph Mallord William Turner

(1775-1851)

English Romantic Painter

Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres

(1780-1867) French Neo Classical Painter

Pieter Breughel the Elder (circa 1525 – 1569)

Dutch Renaissance Painter. His painting of the fall of Icarus, the son of Daedalus, who, when he flew too close to the sun on wings invented by his father the wax holding them together melted and he fell, is mentioned in Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Art."

Piero della Francesca (circa 1415-1492)

Italian Painter of the early Renaissance. His painting of The Baptism of Christ is mentioned in T.S. Eliot's poem "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Service."

Michelangelo di Lodovico

Buonarroti Simoni (1475-1564)

Michelangelo was an Italian painter and sculptor of the Renaissance, known especially for his sculptures the Pietà and David as well as the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.



Landscape with the Fall of Icarus by Pieter Breughel c. 1558; Oil on canvas, mounted on wood, 73.5 x 112 cm; Musees royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels.



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The Baptism of Christ
Piero della Francesca, circa 1450

Music References

“Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered”

1940 song by Richard Rogers and Lorenz Hart.

Don Giovanni

Opera by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. The opera opens with the Commendatore outside the house of Don Giovanni because Giovanni has tried to seduce his daughter Donna Anna.

The Mikado

The 1885 comic opera by W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan is traditionally considered light humorous fare. Set in Japan, it satirizes the British government.

Rachmaninov’s Second Piano Concerto

Written by Russian Composer Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943).

“When I survey the wondrous cross”

Traditional hymn with words by Isaac Watts.

Beethoven’s Pathetique Sonata

Written by German Composer Ludwig Von Beethoven (1770-1827).

“When I’m Cleaning Windows”

1936 song written by George Formby, Harry Gifford and Frederick E. Cliffe.

“Wish Me Luck as you Wave Good Bye” and “Sing as We Go”

Both songs were made famous by the Lancashire-born singer and comedienne Gracie Fields (1898-1979) in her films *Sing as We Go* (1934) and *Shipyard Sally* (1939).

Michael Tippett (1908-1998)

Tippett’s work has been considered difficult to perform and idiosyncratic. He studied music at the Royal College before embarking on an early career as a composer. He often seemed to take on the role of an outsider both for his open homosexuality and his stance as a conscientious objector during World War II.

Anton Bruckner (1824 – 1896)

An Austrian composer, Bruckner is known chiefly as a symphonist at the end of the Romantic Movement.

“It’s a Sin”

Song by the British electronic dance band Pet Shop Boys, which formed in 1981. “It’s a Sin” was a number one single for the band in 1987.

“Bye Bye Blackbird”

1926 song by Ray Henderson and Mort Dixon.

Film References

Carry On Films

Series of British low-budget comedic films produced between 1958-1978, known for their corny situations, slapstick, innuendo and send up of British institutions. Each followed a title character in a profession or adventure or misadventure.

Brief Encounter

1945 film starring Celia Johnson and Trevor Howard.

Now Voyager

1942 film starring Paul Henreid, Bette Davis and Claude Rains.

The Seventh Veil

1945 film starring Ann Todd and James Mason.

This Sporting Life

1963 film starring Richard Harris, about a Rugby team in Northern England.

Discussion Questions

About the History

1. History itself is a subject in the play. In the play Dakin calls Irwin's method subjunctive history, the history of what might have been. Do you think there is value in Irwin's approach to looking at historical events? Why or why not?
2. In addition to world historical events we are also given a glimpse at the personal histories of the characters in the play. What do their personal histories reveal? How do their remembrances differ?
3. Much of the play is not about poetry but literature. Many of the poets quoted wrote during World War I. What resonances exist between the young men at war and the young men in the play?

About the Play

1. The three teachers, Mrs. Lintott, Mr. Hector and Mr. Irwin, have strikingly different teaching methods and goals. Discuss the merits and disadvantages of their competing pedagogies.
2. Irwin says he does not think there is time for Hector's type of teaching any more. What does he mean? What is lost with the loss of Hector?
3. Hector is a problematic character in the play. He is a gifted teacher but some of his actions are inappropriate. Can one reconcile Hector's behavior with his teaching?

4. Mrs. Lintott is the lone woman in the play. What is her role both as an educator and historian? Is it significant that she is surrounded by men, both in the school and in her work? How do you interpret her outburst about the role of women in history?
5. The characters in the play occasionally step outside themselves to comment on the action of the play, either within the moment or sometimes from a perspective years later. How does this commentary help us understand the play?

About the Production

1. In this production of the play you are able to walk past rooms belonging to the eight boys. What does this tell you about the characters? How does it influence your perception of the characters during the course of the play?
2. The actors playing the characters spent a significant amount of time studying the poetry, the French and the history in the play. How necessary do you feel a background is in these subjects for an audience member?
3. TimeLine Theatre is known for lobby panels discussing the historical events. In this production they are missing but the books referenced in the play are often found in the boys rooms. Did you notice any details in the rooms that were mentioned in the play?

References and Works Consulted

Books about Alan Bennett

Alan Bennett: In a Manner of Speaking – Daphne Turner
Alan Bennett: A Critical Introduction – Joseph H. O’Mealy

Books by Alan Bennett

The History Boys
The Complete Talking Heads
Untold Stories
An Uncommon Reader
Writing Home
The Laying on of Hands

Authors and specific works quoted in *The History Boys*

W.H. Auden

“Letter to Lord Byron”

“Lullaby”

New York Times, August 7, 1971

The Bible

Proverbs 9:17

Deuteronomy 30:19

Revelation 30:20

The Book of Common Prayer

Rupert Brooke

“1914”

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

“Kubla Khan”

Frances Cornford

“On Rupert Brooke”

T.S. Eliot

“Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service”

“Gerontion”

Kenneth Grahame

The Wind in the Willows

Robert Graves

“The Last Post”

Thomas Hardy

“Drummer Hodge”

A.E. Housman

“Poem II” and “Poem XXXI” from *A Shropshire Lad*

Hymns Ancient and Modern

Franz Kafka

The Trial

Rudyard Kipling

“The Gentlemen Rankers”

“If any question why we died”

Philip Larkin

“MCMXIV”

“High Windows”

John Milton

“Samson Agonistes”

Friedrich Nietzsche

George Orwell

Wilfred Owen

Blaise Pascal

Plato

Proust

J.D. Salinger

John Paul Sartre

Siegfried Sassoon

William Shakespeare

Othello

King Lear

Hamlet

Love's Labour's Lost

Antony and Cleopatra

Stevie Smith

“Voices Against England in the Night”

“Not Waving but Drowning”

Walt Whitman

“Leaves of Grass”

Oscar Wilde

Ludwig Wittgenstein

“Tractatus 1” and “Tractatus 7” from *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

Virginia Woolf

Note: Poem or book titles have been listed when mentioned or quoted in the play; authors mentioned in the play are listed only by name.

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