Inherit the Wind Drama

Posted on March 6, 2018

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Introduction

Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee's *Inherit the Wind* is often introduced as a drama about the conflict between evolution and biblical creation. That description is accurate, but incomplete. The play uses a fictionalized courtroom battle to examine a broader question: what happens when a community, a government, or a powerful majority decides that certain ideas may not be discussed? Its central conflict is therefore not simply science against religion. It is open inquiry against enforced certainty, individual conscience against public pressure, and thoughtful disagreement against the temptation to turn opponents into enemies.

The drama was inspired by the 1925 Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee, in which teacher John T. Scopes was prosecuted under the Butler Act for teaching evolution in a public school. Lawrence and Lee changed the names, personalities, relationships, and circumstances of the historical participants. Their purpose was not to reconstruct the trial as documentary history but to create a theatrical argument about freedom of thought. This distinction matters because the play becomes more meaningful when it is read both as literature and as a deliberate transformation of history rather than as a factual transcript.

A Courtroom Drama Rather Than a Historical Record

The real Scopes case provides the framework for the plot. Tennessee's Butler Act prohibited teachers in state-supported schools from teaching that human beings descended from a lower order of animals. The American Civil Liberties Union supported a test case, and the trial attracted nationally known figures, including defense lawyer Clarence Darrow and prosecutor William Jennings Bryan. Scopes was convicted, although the Tennessee Supreme Court later set aside the conviction on a technical issue while leaving the law itself in place. The event became a national symbol of the struggle over education, religious authority, and modern science (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], n.d.).

In the play, John Scopes becomes Bertram Cates, Darrow becomes Henry Drummond, and Bryan becomes Matthew Harrison Brady. The fictional town of Hillsboro resembles Dayton, but it is shaped

to intensify the emotional stakes. Cates is jailed and socially isolated. Rachel Brown, the daughter of the town's minister, is invented as his conflicted friend and romantic partner. Reverend Jeremiah Brown embodies severe religious authority, while journalist E. K. Hornbeck functions as a cynical observer and commentator. These changes allow the playwrights to show not only a constitutional conflict but also the private cost of public intolerance.

Lawrence and Lee openly warned readers that the drama was not history. The playwrights were interested in the enduring meaning of the confrontation rather than exact chronology. Scholars have consequently recommended comparing the drama with the historical record instead of using it as a substitute for that record. Such a comparison does not weaken the play. It reveals how dramatic art selects, compresses, and exaggerates reality to make an argument (Larson, Depew, & Isetti, 2008).

The Plot as a Test of Intellectual Freedom

The action begins after Cates has taught Darwin's theory of evolution and has been arrested for violating state law. Hillsboro initially treats the prosecution as a celebration. The arrival of Brady is accompanied by music, banners, speeches, and religious enthusiasm. The community has already decided who represents goodness before the trial begins. Cates is not merely accused of breaking a statute; he is treated as though he has betrayed the town's identity.

Drummond enters this atmosphere as an outsider. His task is legally difficult because Cates admits teaching the prohibited material, and the judge prevents the defense from presenting scientific experts who might explain evolution. Drummond therefore changes the focus of his strategy. He argues that the court should consider the right to think, question, and interpret. When he calls Brady as an expert on the Bible, the trial becomes an examination of literalism. Drummond asks whether every biblical statement must be understood as scientific description and whether human interpretation is unavoidable.

The courtroom structure gives the play its urgency. A trial requires competing claims to be stated publicly, challenged, and judged. Yet the courtroom also exposes the limits of legal procedure. The judge can control which witnesses speak; the crowd can intimidate participants; political leaders can influence the atmosphere; and a formal verdict can fail to settle the moral question. Cates is found guilty, but the small fine cannot erase the significance of Drummond's defense. The legal outcome and the intellectual outcome are deliberately different.

Henry Drummond and the Discipline of Doubt

Drummond is the play's strongest defender of freedom, but he is not presented merely as a spokesman for scientific facts. His deeper commitment is to the human mind. He believes that progress requires the ability to test inherited assumptions. For him, a thought has value not because it is fashionable or rebellious, but because a person has examined it honestly. His defense of Cates

therefore protects a process of inquiry rather than demanding that every citizen accept the same conclusion.

One of Drummond's most important qualities is his refusal to reduce Brady to a monster. The two men have a shared past, and Drummond remembers qualities in Brady that Hornbeck ignores. After Brady's collapse and death, Hornbeck mocks him, but Drummond objects. This moment prevents the drama from becoming a simple victory of enlightened people over foolish believers. Drummond understands that intellectual freedom includes the freedom to believe, provided belief is not imposed through coercion.

His willingness to doubt also applies to himself. He challenges the town, the law, and Brady, but he does not claim to possess final answers to every question. That humility distinguishes reason from dogmatism. In the play, the opposite of fundamentalism is not another rigid ideology; it is the courage to continue thinking.

Matthew Harrison Brady: Faith, Pride, and Public Approval

Brady is more complex than a caricature of religion. He is warm toward his supporters, politically experienced, eloquent, and genuinely convinced that he is defending moral order. His weakness is not faith itself but the fusion of faith with pride and public authority. He needs the crowd's admiration, and he assumes that his interpretation of scripture should govern the classroom.

During Drummond's questioning, Brady's confidence begins to break down. The questions expose tensions between literal interpretation and human judgment. More importantly, the scene reveals that Brady has entered the courtroom expecting reverence rather than scrutiny. He can deliver speeches, but he struggles when the rules of public debate require him to defend his assumptions point by point.

Brady's downfall also illustrates the danger of turning a public controversy into a personal identity. Because he has become the symbol of one side, any challenge to his argument feels like an attack on his entire life. His tragedy is not that he believes deeply; it is that he has tied belief to victory, applause, and control. When the trial no longer produces the triumph he expected, he has little inner space left in which to reconsider.

Rachel Brown and the Human Cost of Conformity

Rachel gives the drama an emotional dimension that the courtroom alone could not provide. She cares for Cates but fears her father, the town, and the religious consequences of supporting him. Her conflict shows how censorship operates through relationships as well as laws. People may remain

silent not because they have been persuaded, but because disagreement threatens family bonds, social acceptance, or spiritual security.

Reverend Brown's prayer meeting makes this danger visible. His anger becomes so severe that he condemns not only Cates but also those who love him. Brady intervenes by invoking the proverb from which the play takes its title: the person who troubles his own house will inherit the wind. The scene is important because the rebuke comes from within the religious side of the conflict. Even Brady recognizes that zeal without compassion can destroy the community it claims to protect.

Rachel's development is therefore essential. She begins as someone caught between obedience and affection, but gradually recognizes that moral maturity requires personal judgment. Her final decision to leave with Cates does not mean she has solved every religious question. It means she is no longer willing to let fear make the decision for her.

E. K. Hornbeck and the Intolerance of Mockery

Hornbeck appears to support Drummond because he ridicules the prosecution and attacks the town's narrowness. However, his cynicism becomes another form of intolerance. He does not merely criticize Brady's arguments; he treats faith, weakness, and emotional attachment as objects of contempt. His clever language gives him distance from everyone, but that distance also prevents sympathy.

Drummond's confrontation with Hornbeck near the end of the play clarifies the moral balance. The defense attorney rejects censorship, but he also rejects the idea that freedom means humiliating people whose beliefs seem outdated. Hornbeck is free from the town's religious conformity, yet he is trapped by his own certainty that believers deserve only laughter. In this sense, Brady and Hornbeck occupy opposite ideological positions while sharing a similar inability to respect their opponents.

The contrast suggests that the play's true enemy is absolutism. A religious majority can become oppressive when it uses law to silence science. A secular intellectual can become cruel when intelligence is used to deny the dignity of ordinary believers. Drummond stands between these extremes because he argues fiercely without surrendering empathy.

Science, Religion, and the Limits of a False Choice

The play is frequently described as presenting science and religion as incompatible. Some scenes encourage that reading, especially the hostility of Hillsboro's fundamentalists. Yet the conclusion is more nuanced. Drummond does not burn the Bible, discard it, or declare that scientific knowledge has answered every spiritual question. He places Darwin's work and the Bible together in his briefcase. The gesture suggests that the two books can occupy the same intellectual world, even though they answer different kinds of questions and cannot both be used as compulsory science textbooks.

This symbolic ending should not be confused with a claim that all explanations are scientifically equal. Evolution is a scientific theory supported by evidence and subject to testing, while religious creation accounts belong to theology and faith. The point is that constitutional government need not attack private religion in order to protect science education. It must prevent the state from making one religious interpretation the controlling standard for public instruction.

The later legal history supports this distinction. In *Epperson v. Arkansas*, the United States Supreme Court unanimously invalidated an Arkansas anti-evolution law. The Court held that a state may regulate its curriculum, but it may not prohibit a scientific theory because a particular religious group considers that theory objectionable (U.S. Supreme Court, 1968). The constitutional principle is neutrality: public schools should not be instruments for establishing or suppressing a faith.

The Crowd, the Media, and Politics as Performance

Hillsboro is not merely the setting; it behaves almost like a collective character. Vendors sell food and souvenirs, politicians seek attention, religious songs fill public space, and journalists turn the trial into national entertainment. The carnival atmosphere demonstrates how easily a complicated educational issue can be simplified into slogans and personalities.

The play's stagecraft repeatedly moves between serious debate and spectacle. Brady's arrival resembles a political rally. Hornbeck's reports transform local events into sharp national commentary. The mayor worries about the town's image. Even the judge's decisions are shaped by awareness of public opinion. These elements show that the case is being tried in two places at once: in the courtroom and in the marketplace of publicity.

This aspect of the drama remains recognizable because modern controversies are also filtered through performance. Public figures may gain attention by exaggerating conflict, while audiences choose sides before examining evidence. *Inherit the Wind* warns that democratic debate becomes fragile when applause matters more than accuracy and when complex questions are reduced to loyalty tests.

The Meaning of the Title and the Final Image

The title comes from Proverbs 11:29: a person who troubles his own household inherits the wind. Within the play, the phrase refers most directly to Reverend Brown's willingness to condemn his daughter in the name of righteousness. More broadly, it describes the emptiness produced by destructive certainty. A community may believe it is protecting itself by punishing dissent, yet discover that it has damaged trust, compassion, and intellectual life.

The "wind" is an appropriate inheritance because it cannot be possessed. Brady seeks lasting public glory but is left without the triumphant conclusion he expected. Reverend Brown tries to secure

obedience but risks losing Rachel. Hillsboro tries to defend unity but exposes its division to the nation. Hornbeck protects himself through mockery but remains isolated. Each character who values control above understanding gains something empty.

Drummond's final action offers an alternative. By taking both Darwin and the Bible, he refuses the demand that every conflict end with the destruction of one side. The books are not identical, and the gesture does not erase disagreement. Instead, it represents the freedom to read, compare, question, believe, and revise. That freedom is the positive inheritance the drama offers in place of the wind.

Why the Play Still Matters

Inherit the Wind premiered in 1955, three decades after the Scopes trial. The timing connects the drama to the climate of McCarthyism, in which accusation, ideological conformity, and fear of association damaged careers and public discussion. The Ohio State University archive devoted to Lawrence and Lee identifies the dignity of the individual mind and its struggle against censorship as a defining concern of their work (Ohio State University Libraries, n.d.). The 1925 controversy gave the playwrights a historical lens through which to examine pressures operating in their own period.

That broader purpose explains the play's durability. Its structure can apply wherever institutions punish questions, communities confuse unity with uniformity, or public debate rewards humiliation. It also remains useful because it refuses a completely comfortable conclusion. Drummond wins a moral argument but not an acquittal. Cates and Rachel leave town rather than transform it overnight. Brady is defeated but not denied his humanity. The audience must decide how freedom can be defended without reproducing the contempt it opposes.

The drama should nevertheless be taught responsibly. Because it fictionalizes history, readers should distinguish the real Scopes participants from their dramatic counterparts. William Jennings Bryan, Clarence Darrow, John Scopes, and the citizens of Dayton were more complicated than the symbolic roles created for the stage. Reading the historical record alongside the play helps students appreciate both the power of drama and the ethical need to separate artistic truth from documentary fact.

Conclusion

Inherit the Wind transforms the Scopes trial into a drama about the freedom and responsibility of the human mind. Through Cates, Rachel, Drummond, Brady, Hornbeck, and the people of Hillsboro, Lawrence and Lee show that censorship is sustained not only by statutes but also by fear, pride, conformity, and the desire for public approval. The play defends scientific education, yet its deepest argument is against any system that forbids honest questioning.

Its lasting strength comes from moral complexity. Drummond opposes Brady's use of religious belief as public coercion, but he also protects Brady from Hornbeck's cruelty. Rachel's growth shows that

independent thought can be emotionally costly. The ending places Darwin and the Bible together, not to blur the difference between science and faith, but to affirm that a free society can protect both inquiry and conscience. The drama ultimately asks audiences to reject the easy comfort of absolute certainty and to choose the more difficult work of thinking, listening, and disagreeing without denying one another's humanity.

References

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