

English B HL Extended Essay

Topic: The Courtroom Drama 'Inherit the Wind' Literary Analysis

Research Question: To what extent do Lawrence and Lee employ contrasting rhetorical and linguistic strategies through the courtroom dialogue of Henry Drummond and Matthew Harrison Brady to dramatize the ideological conflict between scientific progress and religious tradition in

Inherit the Wind?

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A. Introduction

The book, *Inherit the Wind*, was written in 1955 by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee. It is a courtroom drama inspired by the Scopes trial, the purpose of the writers was not to recreate it but to explore how societies controlled ideas. The book was written as a response to the threat to intellectual freedom in the McCarthy era. The years between 1940 and the 1950s are known as the McCarthy era. People during this time generally encouraged people to conform to the views that were present. People resorted to common censorship to avoid being accused of having threatening beliefs, as the accusation could be more significant than the having of factual proof. *Inherit the Wind* uses the 1925 Scopes Trial to make a comment on the McCarthy era. The story is effectively created with the atmosphere felt between the 1940s and the 1950s especially showing how people were devastated by being accused of having threatening beliefs. The way the trial develops also suggests the significant power that the public has over people and the ability for that to overtake logical discussion and opt for moral tests in favor of the public. Showing social acceptance plays a more important role than the truth. Lawrence and Lee were able to create a symbolic representation that allowed them to criticize forced conformity and rigid beliefs in the 1950s politics without directly addressing .

Inherit the Wind's structure consists of three acts, moving from the initial buildup to the verdict and the consequences. The play takes place in Hillsboro. Hillsboro is a fictional place described as a rural, small town in the United States. The play portrays the prosecution process of a school teacher, who is accused of teaching evolution, which is a violation of the law. The trial plays the role of a public stage where legal arguments and religion related arguments collide. The characters Matthew Harrison Brady and Henry Drummond can be considered as the main characters, even

though neither of them is the teacher who is being accused. Matthew Harrison Brady is the prosecuting attorney and Henry Drummond is the defense attorney. They are the central figures of the play because the main conflict is built around their opposing ideas. They represent two contrasting points of view. Brady represents religious conservatism forced through conformity and Drummond represents intellectual freedom of science defended through correct reasoning. The play is resolved through interrogation, persuasion and rhetorical performance. This essay will explore the research question: **To what extent do Lawrence and Lee employ contrasting rhetorical and linguistic strategies through the courtroom dialogue of Henry Drummond and Matthew Harrison Brady to dramatize the ideological conflict between scientific progress and religious tradition in *Inherit the Wind*?** Throughout this essay, a close textual analysis has been used as a method for critically examining the primary source which is *Inherit the Wind* to analyze its language, structure and literary devices.

B. Background information

As *Inherit the Wind* was inspired by the 1925 Scopes (Monkey) trial, the play's connection to history is not like a documentary but more selective and symbolic. The Scopes trial held in Dayton, Tennessee, became a publicized event because it exposed the conflict between the theory of evolution and state law influenced by religious conservatism. This made the trial a widely followed public controversy. The play also depends on the same conditions that made the original trial seen, the features of both trials were spectators outside the courtroom, an oppressive society and a clash transforming into a performance. The play was written in 1950s which was at the same time as the Cold War and McCarthy era. Cold War is a period when the ideological competition between the Soviet Union and the United States, increased the concerns of the public about political beliefs. In that environment, ideas were not treated as personal opinions but as threats

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with national and major consequences. This also led to another separate domestic event that took place within the United States and is referred to as the McCarthy era. The red scare and the subsequent fear of the influence of communists led to people making public accusations of people, and people ruined careers as a result. This is the reason that the writers chose to write about this topic in such an indirect manner. The setting in Scopes allows the writers to investigate the issue of how the community controlled everything that went on within the lives of the individuals in that community. The choice of basing the play on the Scopes case also allows the writers to investigate the way in which the community was able to pass judgment on certain ideas.

C. Characters

C.1. Henry Drummond

In the play, Drummond is the one who defends Cates, who is on trial for teaching evolution. From the beginning of the play, the language that Drummond chooses helps to show the difference between him and Brady who is the prosecutor. Rather than using aggressive language to try and discredit what Cates said, Drummond uses language that shows his eagerness to discuss the subject matter. The way that Drummond discusses the arguments he makes suggests that he is primarily interested in uncovering new knowledge rather than establishing facts. The language and the words that he chooses help to show the audience that his knowledge of these scientific concepts is based on the pursuit of discovering new knowledge. In addition, the language that Drummond uses throughout the play also conveys to the audience that he believes in the rights of individuals to think for themselves and to obtain knowledge for themselves. “Drummond (to the judge): I am trying to establish, Your Honor, that Howard-or Colonel Brady- or Charles Darwin- or anyone in this courtroom-or you, sir- has the right to think!” (Lawrence & Lee, 2003, 1st ed., pp. 71). In this

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process, he reframes the ideological struggle in terms of freedom and despotism, thereby sensationalizing the clash between science and tradition in a way that spills over the court's jurisdiction. One of the main techniques that Drummond uses is his use of a Socratic method of questioning, particularly in cross-examination. Instead of challenging the opposition directly, he leads them into contradictions, Drummond's questions are sharp, concise, and progressive and guide the interrogated party towards an unavoidable conclusion. "Drummond: Then why did God plague us with the power to think? Mr. Brady, why do you deny the one faculty which lifts man above all other creatures on the earth: the power of his brain to reason. What other merit have we? The elephant is larger, horse is stronger and swifter, the butterfly more beautiful, the mosquito more prolific, even the simple sponge is more durable! (wheeling on Brady) Or does a sponge think? Brady: I don't know. I'm a man, not a sponge. Drummond: Do you think a sponge thinks? Brady: If the Lord wishes a sponge to think, it thinks. Drummond: Does a man have the same privileges that a sponge does?" (Lawrence & Lee, 2003, 1st ed., pp. 94). This approach to writing also helps to avoid a potential clash between rational thought and absolutist beliefs. Specifically, in this scene, Drummond uses a gentle manner to allow the logical flaws in Brady's theology to become apparent.

In this way, the discussion becomes one about freedom and restriction rather than the debate between science and religion. This new perspective allows Drummond to highlight the seemingly unbridgeable divide that exists between scientific thought and religious beliefs. Drummond primarily utilizes rhetorical questions, specifically Socratic questions, to accomplish this. While this may suggest to the reader that Drummond is engaging in an aggressive debating tactic, the questions that he poses actually lead his adversary to absurd conclusions. The questions that he poses are brief and lead up to the next question in a logical way. He leads the audience step-by-

step to his conclusions rather than presenting them outright. This approach is both faithful to the nature of logical questioning but also works well because it exposes the weaknesses of systems when faced with logical questioning. In the important scene in the courtroom, where he challenges Brady's acceptance of a literal interpretation of scripture, the language that he uses is careful and respectful; it is Brady's own answers that produce the contradictions. The authority of tradition makes the act of reasoning an individual endeavor to save what is human about humanity. Certainly logic and morality work in his play to establish the authority of the individual over tradition and history alone. By saying: "Drummond: The individual human mind... An idea is a greater monument than a cathedral." (Lawrence & Lee, 2003, 1st ed., pp. 93). Drummond assigns inherent worth to the act of thinking itself. Thus, he disproves all claims to the traditions as a better means to the end of properly guiding action or choice. Such an approach has a dramatic impact as there is no need for an assertion from Drummond, the dramatic impact of this approach is its self-restraint in performatively allowing reason alone to own such authority.

Linguistically, Drummond's uses complex sentences built to resemble the logic of the subject matter, as opposed to emotionally-charged absolutes, his words, speak in ways that invite thought rather than invite approval, unlike Brady's frequent recourse to moral language evinces and adds to the sense that the ideological battle is performed in a heightened and dramatized manner. Apart from the use of logic framing, Drummond also draws on the use of irony as a humble rhetorical device, and humor to make fun of authority and unsettle adherence to a certain worldview as opposed to ridiculing it, and it works particularly well in a courtroom setting where unwanted laughter could have easily undermined his power as the attorney. The fact that Brady was visibly uncomfortable when the audience members laughed indicates that the trial court had considerable influence over the audience.

Importantly, Drummond's rhetoric does not appear to be emotionless. Quite the opposite, it reverberates with a deep concern for humanity and the cost of crippling intellect."Drummond: I'm trying to stop you bigots and ignoramuses from controlling the education of the United States!" (Lawrence & Lee, 2003, 1st ed., pp. 98). Drummond points out that stopping thought does not preserve law and order. It preserves stagnation and fear. By positing the future results of silencing thought, Drummond makes science not merely a well of facts, but one necessary to preserve life itself. This especially applies to the play's Cold War and McCarthy subtext, where adherence to doctrine threatened artistic and intellectual creativity. Through Drummond's speeches, Lawrence and Lee show how inquiry is liberated through language that dismantles the foundation of control rather than language that reinforces it. His powers of language come from creating a complex speaker who, at once, speaks to the jury, to the town, and to the audience as they listen to his words. By using clean and measured language, he is able to confront deeply held beliefs without ever straying into the territory of dismissing the emotions around those beliefs. This careful balancing act also prevents interpreting him as a symbolic figurehead for logic. Instead, this passage presents him as a champion, albeit an imperfect one, for the liberty of ideas and thought. As a result, the ideological battle between scientific advancement and tradition takes place in the courtroom, but not just in ideologies. In two different uses of language, one that invites thought and the other that commands it. Through his words in the courtroom, Drummond is front and center in the ideological battle. At the end of the day, the war over ideas is a war over language and how it can be used to determine who is right, who deserves to be in power, and whose belief system has moral value. Using these carefully structured rhetorical and linguistic devices, Lawrence and Lee place undue but not singular reliance on Drummond's voice to disseminate the play's message

on ideological absolutism, that scientific advancement in *Inherit the Wind* cannot exist without the liberty of thought, questioning, and doubt.

C.2. Matthew Harrison Brady

Brady is the rhetorical embodiment of the religious tradition and the idea of absolutes in *Inherit the Wind*. The way that Lawrence and Lee construct his dialogue suggests that he believes in the power of authority figures, emotional arguments, and using strong language to show that the religious tradition is the best way to preserve order in society. Unlike Drummond, whose language is focused on question and seeking to discover the answers, Brady's language is based on strong moral convictions and a desire for order. In his first major speech, Brady takes a clear stance as someone who defends the values and beliefs of the community. Much of his speeches use "we" and "our" to indicate that he is connected to the people of the town and standing in place as a leader of the community of moral majorities. "Brady: He wants to destroy everybody's belief in the Bible, and in God!" (Lawrence & Lee, 2003, 1st ed., pp. 98). This rhetorical strategy helps to establish Brady as a credible and well-respected public figure and as someone who is committed to defending the status quo. The statements that Brady makes are more definitive than those made by Drummond. For instance, many of the words that Brady uses are words like "truth," "right," "wrong," and "faith" indicating his rigid beliefs about the world and the choices that people should make in it. "Brady: I know, because God tells me to oppose the evil teachings of that man." (Lawrence & Lee, 2003, 1st ed., pp. 99). By showing this reliance on moral certainty, Lawrence and Lee help to show that the religious tradition is strong in terms of the conviction that it holds, but also that it is vulnerable to these issues when confronted with the complexities of the world around them. Brady is effective in that he appeals to the emotions of the audience. In many of

these instances, Brady portrays the idea that teaching evolution is an attack on morality and that it will lead to a moral crisis in society and in the individual.” Brady: Your Honor, I shall not testify against anything. I shall speak out, as I have all my life-on behalf of the Living Truth of the Holy Scriptures!” (Lawrence & Lee). The use of a sermon tone when delivering these longer speeches indicates that Brady was trying to get people to agree and applaud. The fact that this occurs within the courtroom indicates that Brady was aware of his audience and was trying to get the reaction he wanted from the townspeople. This also indicates that Brady was primarily attempting to defend his faith. In several places, Brady refers to God and suggests that the laws of man must align with the laws and teachings of God. The appeal to the otherworldly elements of this idea makes it clear that this argument is being made on the basis of authority rather than logic. However, the writers Lawrence and Lee work to complicate this view. During the cross examination in Act 2, characters in the play, especially Drummond, make it clear that Brady is unable to defend his beliefs about the literal nature of the Bible. The certainty that Brady presented as a positive element during the trial begins to unravel during this cross examination. The playwrights use this breakdown of rhetorical devices to show the weaknesses of absolutism. However, it is also important to note that Brady is not just some caricature of someone who is convinced of the dogma they espouse. Rather, Brady is convinced due to his belief and desire to protect the moral truth that he believes to be true. The language also conveys a sense of rigidity and, more importantly, fear of the consequences of abandoning traditional values. This emotional aspect of the rhetorical situation adds further complexity to the discussion of the opposing ideologies. Brady makes clear the power of traditional values to determine an individual's identity. In doing so, he makes it clear that Brady sees the scientific movement as threatening to these traditional and psychologically comforting values. The reader feels the tension of the ideological conflict created by the framing of the dialogue. The

rhetorical questions that Brady uses, although not meant to be answered, contrast with the questions that Drummond poses. The sentences that Brady writes all end with emphatic conclusions that reinforce the idea that the answers and outcomes are already established. This type of language suggests that Brady believes the traditions that exist are fixed and that any change to them would be dangerous. Considering the rhetoric and language that Brady employs, it is clear that Lawrence and Lee intend to show the power of traditional beliefs and values. At the same time, the play also reveals the fragility of this type of dominance. The language that Brady chooses for the courtroom is crucial to understanding the ideas that are presented to the audience. Drummond's language suggests that people should be allowed to think, while Brady's language suggests that people need to feel secure in what they know is true. The contrast between the two types of language creates the tension of the play. Moreover, it is clear that Brady, as a character, makes evident to the audience that the traditions that people uphold can both support and prevent people from gaining knowledge. By presenting these speeches, authors Lawrence and Lee make clear that the debate over evolution becomes a debate over the source of authority and the nature of truth, and the way that language is used in these debates.

C.3. Conflict

The main conflict in the play *Inherit the Wind* is not simply the scientific disagreement between the ideas of evolution; it is the conflict between the ideas of Drummond and Brady and the way in which they use language and rhetoric. Both of these characters may seem to be defending the same moral outcome, but the difference in the way that they do so is what creates most of the tension in the play. Drummond employs rhetoric and language that is inductive and logical, whereas Brady's language is more based on moral certainty and emotion. This contrast

between the two leads to a clear understanding of the conflict between these two individuals. One of the most significant aspects of this conflict is the difference between questioning and declaring. The questions that Drummond puts forth in the courtroom work to show the inconsistencies within Brady's interpretation of the scripture. The statements that Brady makes, on the other hand, are made unquestionably and show the certainty that he feels people should have regarding his beliefs. This difference reflects the difference in the ideologies that each group holds. The scientific perspective on the world requires people to question and to allow for change in the ideas that people hold. At the same time, the religious perspective, as reflected in the play, requires people to feel certain about their beliefs and not to change them. Importantly, there is no indication that the ideological conflict between the characters is a simplistic representation of the scientific vs. religious conflict. The emotional considerations that are made clear are that Brady is genuinely fearful of the collapse of morals, and that Drummond is genuinely fearful of the suppression of knowledge. Yet, the way that the dialogue breakdown indicates that Brady is unable to take the intellectual challenges to his position suggests that his worldview is less flexible to complex ideas. Rather than resorting to physical violence to end the dialogue, Lawrence and Lee indicate that the real battle to be fought is in the exchange of ideas and language. The conflict between scientific and religious ideas, therefore, becomes compelling due to the different rhetorical approaches used by the characters to argue their points.

D. Conclusion

To a significant extent, Lawrence and Lee use contrasting rhetorical and linguistic techniques in the dialogue between Drummond and Brady to demonstrate the contrasting views of science and religion in *Inherit the Wind*. The courtroom becomes a linguistic battlefield in which the characters express their views on the issues facing society at the time of the story's events. Drummond's rhetoric indicates the principles of science. He emphasizes the ability of people to question, as opposed to the desire for people to declare. He also insists on the logical development of ideas, rather than the emotional development of ideas. Furthermore, he emphasizes the value of people having the right to think, as one of the great freedoms that humankind possesses. By using questions and reasoning, Drummond makes clear the vulnerabilities of belief. In contrast, the dialogue that Brady engages in within the courtroom indicates the persuasive power of the religious tradition, as he uses emotional and rhetorical appeals. The nature of the statements that he makes suggests that he believes that the religious tradition is necessary to maintain the society in which he lives. The rhetorical devices that Brady uses indicate that he is someone who believes in the preservation of the existing social and religious order. However, the absoluteness of this viewpoint also becomes a weakness in Brady's arguments.

The contrasting strategies that are employed give strong shape to the ideological conflict that exists within the play. Both authors place greater emphasis on the contrast between inquiry and assertion, and the resulting sense of individual thought versus thought in a collective. However, there is no indication that either author is attempting to suggest the common "reason versus ignorance" conflict. Instead, the language that is used by Brady indicates that he is genuinely concerned about a moral decline in society. Similarly, the language that is used by

Drummond suggests that he sees the pursuit of knowledge as an essential ethical value. The clash of the different ideas within the play is best illustrated by the dialogue between Drummond and Brady. The contrast between these two speakers highlights the different attitudes the characters have towards the ideas of inquiry and certainty.

Referances

Lawrence, J., & Lee, R. E. (2003). Act 2 Scene 2. In *Inherit the Wind* story, ballatine books.

LitCharts. (2016, August 3). *Science vs. religion theme in Inherit the Wind*. Retrieved February 5, 2026

LitCharts. (2016, August 3). *Henry Drummond character analysis in Inherit the Wind*. Retrieved February 5, 2026

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