

# Jerome Lawrence and Robert Edwin Lee's Inherit the Wind: the theme of foolishness...

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## **Inherit the Wind**

*Inherit the Wind* highlights the constant battle between ignorance and enlightenment. Authors Lawrence and Lee use the political and religious elite as advocates for ignorance, their thirst for power and unanimous support leading them to manipulate their followers into staying with them in their dark, unenlightened world. They then use Henry Drummond as the spokesperson for knowledge by portraying him as a man who has no agenda to either side but rather encourages the townspeople to think for themselves. This confrontation remains relevant today and Lawrence and Lee mention it to prepare society for when they must choose to stand up against ignorance or remain comfortably in the dark. By showing the community leaders as manipulators set on gaining support at all costs and showing Drummond as the liberator and encourager of free thought, *Inherit the Wind* makes the reader realize that the argument between ignorance and enlightenment is an important one for him to consider.

The elite in *Inherit the Wind*, both political and religious, strive to keep their followers in the dark, by either telling them what they want to hear or threatening them into support, as a manipulation tactic to ensure their continuing support for obsolete ideals. For example, the mayor of Hillsboro mentions that with elections coming up in November, the politicians should avoid discussing any unpopular concepts (evolution, for example) that might get the voters "steamed up." He desires power so much that he caters directly to his voters to gain their support, even if that means keeping them in the dark and encouraging their Old Testament-style of living rather than

bringing them into the modern world of science. Later in the book, Brady speaks to the townspeople and says "(with growing fervor,) the whole world will be watching our victory over Drummond;" especially with the knowledge that Brady is preparing for his third run for president, this implies that he only took this case to garner publicity and support from religious communities. He manipulates the ignorant voters into supporting him by taking their side and actively condemning the enlightened with them, in this scenario Cates. The political elite aren't the only ones guilty of encouraging ignorance among their followers- Reverend Brown, Hillsboro's religious leader, calls down hellfire on Cates and his supporters during a religious meeting, saying "do we curse the man who denies the Word?" Rather than manipulating the townspeople by taking their side as the politicians do, the Reverend uses fear; by condemning anyone who is even slightly unsure in their devotion to the Bible (such as his own daughter), he effectively ensures that the townspeople unflinchingly support his own outdated views and keeps enlightenment in the form of science from entering his town. The elite resist any form of progress against their ideals by manipulating the masses into following them.

Since *Inherit the Wind* highlights the struggle between ignorance and enlightenment, Drummond provides the counter to the elite in Hillsboro- he is the advocate for knowledge and the right to determine for oneself what is true. When he cross-examines Harold in court, he asks the boy if he has thought about evolution and if it makes sense to him; he never asks Harold to agree with either side but merely encourages him to make his own

decision. This shows that Drummond does not have an agenda to convince the townspeople that either side of this debate is correct but rather that he wants individuals to draw their own conclusions and form their own opinions instead of being manipulated into remaining ignorant. Later in the trial when Brady takes the stand, Drummond cross-examines him on the Bible, Brady's self-proclaimed area of expertise. While he cannot cross Brady on scientific matters as per legal procedure, Drummond's willingness to use other sources of knowledge (even those that his opposing counsel is using to condemn his side) indicates his openness to both sides; yet again he shows that he does not wish to lead anyone to an answer but only wants them to choose enlightenment over ignorance. The final scene in the play shows Drummond picking up Brady's Bible, putting it in his briefcase along with his own *Origin of Species*, and walking out of the courtroom. This continues the theme of Drummond advocating for the right to think by showing his openness- he gathers information from all sides of the argument before coming to his own conclusion; by setting an example of this, he demonstrates his desire for all people to come up with their own, educated answers. Drummond's only wish is that people can make their own decisions free from manipulation and his lack of bias, even in criminal court, shows this.

Lawrence and Lee portray this conflict between ignorance and knowledge to tip the scale in favor of enlightenment, because it will always remain an issue in society. In fact, the foreword of this play specifically mentions that the setting is intended to be vague; it could take place in the rural 1920s or

it could take place in a city last week. This is done in an effort to keep the storyline relevant- the fact that the issue is brought up in such a generic timeframe ensures that readers can always use the arguments presented in this play if they take a stand against ignorance. Using politicians as the advocates for the manipulation of the ignorant adds to the relevance of the plot in modern society; much like the mayor of Hillsboro does not contradict what the voters want to hear in order to keep their vote, the Republican party refuses to change their stance on immigration in order to keep the support of their conservative white voters. By catering directly to the outdated wants of their main voting demographic, both the Hillsboro government and the GOP resist entry into a more enlightened, progressive world and support the voters' (perhaps subconscious) wish to remain in a dark, ignorant world. Not only is this a modern issue, however, it has been an issue since the beginning of time; even Plato thought about how the ignorant people trapped in his Cave were unwilling to accept the other man's different knowledge about the world. The timelessness of this debate between ignorance and knowledge makes it even more important- the problem is not going to go away, so Lawrence and Lee expose the reader to this thought that is as old as society itself. Since the confrontation between ignorance and enlightenment is so widespread, it is the focal point of this play to expose the thoughts and arguments of both sides to the reader.

Lawrence and Lee encourage the reader to consider the confrontation between ignorance and enlightenment as an issue affecting modern life through the use of politicians and lawyers as advocates for both sides. The

elite manipulating the masses into supporting outdated, harmful ideals is portrayed through Brady, the mayor, and the Reverend shamelessly catering to the voters' and churchgoers' wants. Drummond's plea for free thought and the right to choose one's own opinions contradicts this. Finally, by making Hillsboro a generic town and making the issue written about timeless, the authors encourage the reader to think about this issue. After all, everyone must choose whether they want to stay in the dark and resist progress, or come out into the light.