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**“A RELIGIOUS ORGY IN TENNESSEE”:
THE (MIS)REPRESENTATION OF THE SCOPES ‘MONKEY’
TRIAL IN LAWRENCE AND LEE’S INHERIT THE WIND
AND ITS CINEMATIC ADAPTATIONS**

Keywords: *theory of evolution/Darwinism; religious fundamentalism; media extravaganza; literary/cinematic (mis)representations*

Abstract: *The aim of my paper is to explore the extent to which the popular representations of the Scopes ‘Monkey’ Trial (1925) in the media of the day, in the play by Jerome Lawrence and Robert Edwin Lee, Inherit the Wind (1955) and its subsequent cinematic adaptations have altered the American public’s perception about what came to be known as ‘the trial of the century’. I discuss the manner in which starting from one teacher’s violation of an act which made it unlawful to “teach any theory that denies the story of Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals”, the trial’s coverage in the media and its later literary and cinematic renditions were used to manipulate and fuel a war between religion and science, as well as provide a critique of the American society at large.*

In April 1925, the peaceful life of the small Southern rural community in Dayton, Tennessee was disrupted when the young biology teacher John Thomas Scopes was arrested while teaching the theory of evolution to ninth graders contrary to a state act which made it unlawful to “teach any theory that denies the story of Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals”. Once arrested by a group of men which included, among others, the local reverend, and under the terrified gazes of his pupils, Scopes was taken to jail in expectation for his trial. These dramatic scenes and the ensuing tensions were soon to escalate and to focus national attention on what was to become ‘the trial of the century’ and one of the most publicized legal battles in the history of the United States.

Except that none of the facts leading to the trial actually happened as presented above. Nevertheless, even ninety years later the American public arguably considers it the official version of what ignited a major controversy in that incredibly hot summer in Dayton, as most Americans get their version of events from the canonical text they study in school on the matter – namely, Jerome Lawrence and Robert Edwin Lee’s play *Inherit the Wind* written thirty years later¹ to suit a different cultural and political climate, as well as from its cinematic adaptations over the years – four so far. The opening scenes in both movie versions of the play under scrutiny in the present paper (the ones in 1960 and 1999,

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¹ The play’s first performance was in January 1955.

respectively) feature an ominous gathering of men leading to the local school determined to subject the disobedient teacher to a citizen's arrest² and place him in jail until the matters are settled. In order to resolve the issue, both the prosecution and the defense throw into the legal arena two of the most celebrated figures of the times: a three-time Democratic Presidential candidate, popular attorney-turned-politician and leading member of the Fundamentalist crusade in the United States for the prosecution and the then most famous (some would argue infamous) criminal lawyer in America and, for all intents and purposes, a renowned atheist and "champion of anticlericalism" (Larson 3), on the side of the defense. The two larger than life personalities collide throughout the trial, to the absolute delight of the media and causing much chagrin to the judge, turning the legal battle over Scopes's violation of the law against the teaching of evolution in American schools into a battle between "Darwin and Jehovah, and the Devil take the hindmost" (*Inherit the Wind*, 1999).

How John Scopes really came to be indicted is both less dramatic and less known to the larger public, so familiar with the images of the young teacher forcefully carried out to the court in broad daylight by a group of stern public servants, as shown in the movies. In 1925, the Butler Act was signed into law in Tennessee after a rather controversial and confusing adoption course in the state legislature. Prohibiting the teaching of the Theory of Evolution by public school teachers and university professors and providing penalties for the violations thereof, the new law came under the attention of the New York based American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), five years since established and yet without any virtual success to boast. Ostensibly seizing the opportunity to make their breakthrough, the ACLU offered to help any Tennessee schoolteacher challenge the new law in court in a test case³ on First Amendment⁴ issues.

The offer sounded irresistible to a local young business man who had previously professed his support for the teaching of human evolution and his disdain towards the new Butler law in Tennessee. Originally a New Yorker and described in the media of the day as "a stranger to the south and southern ways" (Larson 88), George Rappleyea convinced a few other leading figures in the Dayton community (the chair of the county school board and drugstore owner Fred Robinson, School Superintendent Walter White, who "liked the antievolution law but loved publicity for his town even more" (Larson 89), local attorney John Godsey, among others) of the great opportunity coming their way and decided over a friendly gathering in Robinson's drugstore to stage the case anticipated by the ACLU. All they needed was a defendant for the case, whom they found in John Scopes, as he was young, single (as opposed to his image as "Romeo with a biology book" in the play and movies, involved in a relationship with the Reverend's very daughter), had no intention to settle down in Dayton and had been substituting for the local biology teacher – a family

² In common law jurisdictions; it can be defined as the detainment of a person suspected of having committed a crime (felony or misdemeanor), by a person other than a police officer.

³ A suit brought specifically for the establishment of an important legal right or principle.

⁴ "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances".

man with plenty of administrative duties. Although described in the play as “a slight, frightened man who had deliberately broken the law” (Lawrence and Lee 2), Scopes taught physics, mathematics, was a part-time football coach and apparently had never taught evolution – during his trial, he even had to convince his students to testify against him and coach them with regard to their answers. In fact, for his science classes as a substitute he had been relying on George William Hunter’s *A Civic Biology*, a book approved by the state which could even be bought at Robinson’s drugstore. Moreover, contrary to popular belief, Scopes interrupted his tennis match to attend the meeting of the “drugstore conspirators” (Larson 89) in which he was pressed to accept the challenge and returned to his match after agreeing to be the defendant: “I realized that the best time to scotch the snake is when it starts to wiggle. The snake had been wiggling a good long time” (qtd. in Crompton 20).

The role played by the media back in the day cannot be underestimated. Following Scopes’s acceptance to play his part in the case, a front-page article the next day read:

J.T. Scopes, head of the science department of the Rhea County high school was . . . charged with violating the recently enacted law prohibiting the teaching of evolution in the public schools of Tennessee. . . . The defendant will attack the new law on constitutional grounds (Larson 92)

while others noted that “[s]omething has happened that’s going to put Dayton on the map!” (Larson 91) and that “the battle of Tennessee may play as significant a part in American history as the Battle of Gettysburg” (Wood 147). Although opposed to the antievolution law, a number of newspapers and journals across the country criticized Dayton for staging the trial noting that “[it] could not have overlooked such an opportunity to secure front page advertising space throughout the civilized world” and deplored “the humiliating proceeding” of “the Dayton serio-comedy” claiming that “every lawyer in the state is holding his head in shame” (Larson 94). Similarly condemning the publicity stunt organized by the locals, political figures of the day further argued that “the Dayton trial will be a travesty” since “[i]t’s not a fight for evolution or against evolution, but a fight against obscurity” (Larson 93), with “beginnings [springing] unabashedly from commercial enterprise” and designed “as a public relations scheme dreamed up by promotion-minded civic boosters who saw opportunity to put their ‘obscure and happy’ hometown of Dayton on the map.” (Harrison 4) The event in Dayton indeed rallied journalists and reporters from all over the United States and even from London, who provided daily coverage of the trial via live radio broadcast⁵ from the courtroom or by telegraph.⁶

Undoubtedly, the Daytonians were perfectly aware that the upcoming trial and the publicity around it would benefit the local business and consequently “Dayton was swept and dusted, and hung with billboards and bunting” (Farrell 365). As one newspaper noticed,

⁵ The Scopes trial is the first event of its kind in the history of radio to be broadcast live from the courtroom, “undertaken as a demonstration of the public service of radio in communicating to the masses great news events” (Larson 142).

⁶ Reportedly, a total of two million words were filed by telegraph during the trial (Chiasson 88).

“now that the trial has been put into the advertising class, monkey has become the most popular word in Dayton’s vocabulary” (Larson 105). The shops would be decorated with pictures of monkeys and apes advertising drugs or “simian” sodas, the constable’s motorcycle would permanently carry a sign reading “Monkeyville Police”, and a delivery service deemed “Monkey Express” was established (Larson 105). What is more, for a fee, anyone in Dayton could pose with a chimpanzee or examine the fossilized remains of the “missing link” (Larson 142) and even a Scopes Trial Entertainment Committee was established to arrange for visitors’ accommodation and facilities. Consequently, it can be argued that although economics represented an important driving force of the trial, both the play and its cinematic adaptations only hinted at the commercial potential involved by the event. Both movies feature scenes which present the festive, fair-like atmosphere which is especially obvious in ‘Messiah’ Brady’s arrival to town. Among cotton candy counters and popcorn stands and spinning carousels, the Great Commoner is welcomed by a huge crowd with slogans such as “Keep Satan out of Hillsboro”, “Atheists Go Back to Your Apes”, “Godliness Not Gorillas”, “Don’t Monkey with Us”, “Don’t Pin a Tail on Me”, led by a choir of women marching bags in hand through the town, invoking biblical figures.

It wasn’t just the local frenzy and the media extravaganza that transformed what ACLU envisaged as a narrow test case into ‘the trial of the century’. The case arguably escaped the control of the ACLU when the renowned and popular three-time presidential candidate and champion of Christianity William Jennings Bryan volunteered to argue the case for the prosecution, as it made it obvious that evolution would be on trial in Dayton and not individual liberties as initially intended by the New York based association. A second blow came when Clarence Darrow, the most famous (and controversial) American criminal attorney at the time joined the defense team, above all to confront Bryan. Again, the ACLU was inimical to Darrow’s services in the case (and even tried to get rid of him on several occasions), as they very well anticipated that he was to turn their narrow appeal for academic freedom into a battle against religious fundamentalism. Soon even the defendant himself became negligible and the trial turned into a contest over ideas, pitting science against religion and scientific and intellectual progress against the backwardness of religious indoctrination.

The cultural background played a very important role in the Scopes Trial and it has been argued that Lawrence and Lee’s play, designed to put forth a critique of McCarthyism and its communist witch hunts of the American fifties rather than stay true to the cultural and social atmosphere in the 1920s, hijacked the meaning and the impact of the entire event. At the beginning of the last century, the United States witnessed a developing clash between intellectuals and the larger public in literature and the arts, in philosophy, physics, with respect to moral standards and battles over religious belief (Conkin 99). The period was characterized by an abundance of popular-science magazines and bestsellers which contributed to the expansion of scientific knowledge and affected culture under its different guises, from “art and poetry to self-help and fashion”, from “streamlined design to physical health” so that “progress and modernity appeared to depend on a more scientific approach to life” (Currell 12). What is more, the fault lines between the North and the South got wider and deeper and the Scopes trial seemed derived from these “tectonic shifts in American culture” (Moran), from the war between

the old and the new, between the dominant Victorian morality of the agrarian and traditional American South entranced by religious fundamentalism and a North growing more diverse and more urban, harboring a large number of intellectuals and liberal theologians. Consequently, the trial stemmed from and illustrated this very irreconcilable tension between science and religion, modernity and tradition, between the rising metropolis and the rural heartland, between the intellectual liberal and the conservative fundamentalist (Currell 16).

Additionally, proving that indeed culture in the 1920s was seemingly obsessed with “one hundred percent Americanism”, and anything American was permissible while anything other was condemnable (Wood 159), Clarence Darrow claimed that the Tennessee law he was aiming to strike down was “un-American and therefore unconstitutional” as it stood for an “attempt to limit the human mind’s inquiry after truth” and further stated that John Scopes broke the law as “he believe[d] the statute undemocratic, un-American, and a matter which affect[ed] the entire nation” (Wood 155). Neither the play, nor its subsequent cinematic renditions doubted or disputed the (un)Americanness of the act.

The confrontation of the “two legal giants of the century” was depicted in Lawrence and Lee’s play as a “Roman circus” where acting “[l]ike two bull elephants locked in mortal combat”, both the representative of the prosecution and that of the defense “bellowed and roared imprecations and abuse”, the spectators sitting “uneasily in the sweltering heat with murder in their hearts, barely able to restrain themselves”, while “[a]t stake was the freedom of every American” (2). In both the staged and the cinematic versions of *Inherit the Wind*, the two legal counselors are presented in opposition, in more ways than one. On the one hand, Matthew Harrison Brady (the Bryanesque figure) is portrayed as “a benign giant of a man, wearing a pith helmet”, “gray, balding, paunchy, an indeterminate sixty-five” who “basks in the cheers and the excitement [of the crowd], like a patriarch surrounded by his children”, nothing short of “the warrior who has fought for . . . ordinary people” (Lawrence and Lee 8-9). In the defense’s corner, Henry Drummond (molded over Darrow), whose name was “like a whip-crack”, boasted “the most agile legal mind of the twentieth century” but was perceived by the community of faithful in Hillsboro (a fictional Dayton) as a “vicious, godless man”, a true “agent of darkness”, “a slouching hulk of a man, whose head juts out like an animal’s” and who makes one “wonder why God made such a man. And then you know that God didn’t make him, that he is a creature of the Devil, perhaps even the Devil himself!” (Lawrence and Lee 11-12). On the other hand, if one is to look beyond appearances and perceptions of the two by the local community, it is Brady that ends up humiliated by Drummond, who challenges his religious fervor in open court and manages to discredit him live on radio and before his ardent supporters in Hillsboro. As both the play and the movies show, at the end of his cross-examination, the ‘Great Commoner’ had proven himself both illiterate with respect to scientific developments and incapable to defend the Bible. In the probably most famous and best remembered scene in the play and the movies, Matthew Harrison Brady is examined by Henry Drummond as a last resort measure for the defense, who had seen all their expert witnesses struck down by the honorable judge. Willful to stand up for Christianity, to speak as “one of the world’s foremost experts on

the Bible” and thus to lead “the fight of the Faithful throughout the world” (Lawrence and Lee 25), Brady falls into Drummond’s trap and all he manages to convey is a confused creationist speech.

However, the renowned defender of civil liberties and individual rights Alan Dershowitz believes that, contrary to his portrayal in both the play and movies, Bryan was not actually “the know-nothing biblical literalist of *Inherit the Wind*” and that on close reading, the transcript of the trial reveals how he “actually seems to have gotten the better of Clarence Darrow in the argument over the Bible (though not in the argument over banning the teaching of evolution)” (Dershowitz 266). Along the same lines, it has been argued that Bryan’s objection to the teaching of evolution stemmed not (just) from religious fundamentalism, but primarily from his aversion to the Darwinian concept of survival of the fittest, that “merciless law by which the strong crowd out and kill off the weak” and which had laid “the foundation for the bloodiest war in history”, leading both capitalist and laborer “into a life-and-death struggle from which sympathy and the spirit of brotherhood are eliminated”, thus “transforming the industrial world into a slaughterhouse” (qtd. in Cherny 173).

Contrary to what actually happened and based on a lot of speculation, the different versions of *Inherit the Wind* have Matthew Harrison Brady die in court, arguably as a result of his embarrassment coupled with exaggerated eating habits made obvious in all fictional representations of the Scopes case. In reality, Bryan did die in Dayton a few days after the conclusion of the trial, but at the end of a long and tiresome tour de force for the “Great Commoner” throughout the American South.

Arguably one of the most distorted images to make its way into Lawrence and Lee’s play, and be perpetuated on the screen thenceforth, is that of the local community in Dayton. Obviously, the angry lynch-mob singing “We’ll hang Bert Cates to a Sour Apple Tree” to the tune of the “battle Hymn of the Republic” while setting fire to a cloth dummy hanging by the neck served the two playwrights well in alluding to the witch hunts of the McCarthy era. One of the characters in the play even calls for “Hooligans of the world [to] unite”, as “You’ve got nothing to burn but your intellectuals” (Lawrence and Lee 41).

It wasn’t just the political and social background of the play, nor sensationalism alone which contributed to this misshapen rendition of the Daytonians. The media of the 1920s actually created an image of Dayton as home to religious fanatics, to ignorant and backward people. In a satirical article published in *The New Yorker*, the author advertised for an expedition into “Darkest Tennessee”, where “even the most primitive forms of civilization [have] never penetrated”. The *San Francisco Chronicle* announced that science would be used as a “torch to guide Tennessee out of darkness”. Using similar rhetoric, *Time* magazine suggested that “in the remote vastness of Tennessee” crowds travelled to Dayton in “dusty wagons, gigs, buggies, and small automobiles, jostling up the country roads. In them are gaunt farmers, their wives in gingham and children in overalls” (Wood 154).

While not a hotbed of modernism (as according to an informal survey conducted during the trial 85% of those attending Dayton churches believed the Bible literally), the small community in Tennessee were not over-religious either, as “a relatively high

percentage of Dayton residents did not belong to any denomination” and even “the town’s Masonic lodge claimed more adult male members than any local church”. Even the American journalist, satirist and social critic H. L. Mencken, who apparently expected “to find a squalid Southern village, with darkies snoozing on the houseblocks, pigs rooting under the houses and the inhabitants full of hookworm and malaria” confessed to have actually found “a country town full of charm and even beauty”, where there was no “evidence . . . of that poisonous spirit which usually shows itself where Christian men gather to defend the great doctrines of their faith” (Mencken 29). What never made it into the media reports of the times, nor into the play and movies is how the crowd in Dayton actually managed to reach that middle ground between modernism and fundamentalism. Contrary to the recurrent image of the angry mob in the movies, “the Evolutionists and the Anti-Evolutionists seem[ed] to be on the best of terms, [being] hard in a group to distinguish one from another” (Mencken 29). Moreover, the locals seemed open to both the defense’s and the prosecution’s arguments and seemed to applaud most fervently Dudley Field Malone’s⁷ eloquent defense of freedom (Conkin 86, Cherny 178, Chapman 217) – deemed the best speech of the trial but not presented in the play or movies. In reality, even Butler himself, the author of the contested legal ban, came to Dayton and “was gracious, friendly, badly wanted the court to hear the expert witnesses for the defense, and professed a desire to learn more about evolution” (Conkin 86).

The play *Inherit the Wind* was not history, as Lawrence and Lee stressed many times:

Only a handful of phrases have been taken from the actual transcript of the famous Scopes trial. Some of the characters of the play are related to the colorful figures in that battle of giants; but they have a life and language of their own – and therefore, names of their own. (qtd. in Larson 240)

It may not have been accurate history, but made for a brilliant Broadway performance – and it all but replaced the actual trial in the nation’s memory (Larson 241). Ever since the play’s first performance in 1955, conservative Christians apparently have shown greater interest in countering the popular impression created by the play rather than by the trial. The trial itself became, as the historian of religion Martin E. Marty⁸ later described it, “one final irrelevancy”, meaning that it gained significance “as an event of media-mythic proportions” and not for what actually occurred (Larson 245). For the general public since 1960, that “acquired mythic character” came chiefly through *Inherit the Wind*, still a very popular performance in theaters across the United States and, so far, the subject of four cinematic adaptations.

⁷ In spite of his rather accidental presence as part of the defense team, Malone managed to deliver a speech which arguably marked the turning point of the trial (Moore). H. L. Mencken reported for *The Baltimore Evening Sun* that Malone’s argument was “one of the best presentations of the case against the fundamentalist rubbish that I have ever heard”, similarly noting the “tremendous cheer – a cheer at least four times as hearty as that given to Bryan” which accompanied it.

⁸ Served as president of the American Academy of Religion, the American Society of Church History, and the American Catholic Historical Association.

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