

# **The Scopes Trial**

## **A Study Guide for *Destiny in Dayton***

In his closing remarks to the court, William Jennings Bryan described the Scopes Trial as “a little case.” It was a misdemeanor case, with only a fine for anyone convicted. But Mr. Bryan added that the “world is interested...because it raises an issue that will someday be settled right.”

He was right when he said the world was interested; as many as 200 reporters covered the trial, transmitting some 2 million words from Dayton over a period of about two weeks in July 1925. The Scopes Trial was the first American trial broadcast live over a national radio network. Newsreel cameramen captured much of the action, which was distributed movie houses across the country during the weeks following the trial. But it was just a misdemeanor case, not much different in legal terms than a charge of bootlegging whisky.

Most likely, Mr. Bryan’s “issue” was that of human origin, and that certainly was the hot topic in the 1920s. While human origin (creation or evolution) is still an interesting topic for many individuals today, it doesn’t capture the headlines that it did in the 1920’s. So why are we still interested in this “little case?”

As you watch the play or read the script, be alert for clues that can help answer that question. What makes *Destiny in Dayton* different from many other dramatizations of the Scopes Trial is that more than 90 percent of the dialogue is taken directly from the trial transcript. What you hear Clarence Darrow, William Jennings Bryan, Tom Stewart and other characters say is what they said in this courtroom in 1925. There are three major differences between *Destiny* and the Scopes Trial: there will be a maximum of about 200 spectators in the audience, not more than 600 who watched the trial in person; the whole play is presented in the courtroom without going outdoors like the court did on July 20, 1925; and we have air conditioning today.

Listen to what the lawyers say about:

- Parents’ rights to control the curriculum of public schools
- Teachers’ rights to teach what they believe to be true
- Students’ rights to hear more than one side of a controversial issue
- The right of the majority to set standards for school curricula
- The right of the minority to have a voice in public decisions
- The role of religion in public life
- The nature of our American form of government and decision-making.

**After you have seen or read the play, here are some questions to consider:**

1. Should parents have a voice in setting the curriculum for public schools? Why or why not?
2. Should teachers be permitted to teach whatever they like in their classes? If so, should there be any limits to what they teach? If so, who should set those limits?
3. Should students’ religious beliefs affect what is taught? Should the teachers’ religious beliefs affect what they teach? Why or why not?

4. Should the age/grade of students influence what they are taught? Why or why not?
5. Do students have any rights concerning what they are taught? If so, what are those rights?
6. Many people (including politicians) say that the United States is a democracy. Is that correct?
7. Does “the majority” have a right to set rules for everyone, even those who disagree with those rules? Why or why not.
8. Who or what protects the rights of “the minority?”
9. Should the religious beliefs of an individual affect how he/she is treated or treats other people?
10. Are there limits to what influence religious beliefs should have on public life?

### **For further study**

*Destiny in Dayton* is a historically accurate dramatization of the Scopes Trial, but like any account of an event, it cannot tell the whole story. For example, it only scratches the surface of how the trial came to be in Dayton. It does not explain the social, religious, political or scientific context in which the trial took place. In a stage time of about two hours, it covers highlights of what took place over eight days in real time.

To learn more about the context of the trial, and about the trial itself, we recommend the following resources:

*Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion*, by Edward J. Larson (1997). This book won the Pulitzer Prize in History in 1998, and remains the standard overview of the trial.

*The Scopes Monkey Trial: America's Most Famous Trial and Its Ongoing Legacy*, by Randy Moore (2023). This book is a valuable addition to Scopes Trial literature as it offers insights into the community of Dayton, the religious objections to teaching evolution, the personality of John Scopes, and the legal and scientific legacies of the trial.

*Monkey Business: The True Story of the Scopes Trial*, by Marvin Olasky and John Perry (2005). This book provides informative details about Dayton and the Trial, and includes an analysis of the trial and its issues from an unapologetic Christian perspective.

Online - <https://famous-trials.com/scopesmonkey>. This website contains a wealth of information about trial participants, the legal issues, news accounts and commentary about the case, as well as an extensive bibliography.