

Avengeing Angel?

John Brown, the Harpers Ferry Raid and the “Irrepressible” Conflict

A Unit of Study for Grades 9–12

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INTRODUCTION

APPROACH AND RATIONALE

A*vengeing Angel? John Brown, the Harpers Ferry Raid and the “Irrepressible” Conflict* is one of over 60 National Center for History in the Schools teaching units that are the fruits of collaborations between history professors and experienced teachers of both United States and World History. The units represent specific dramatic episodes in history from which you and your students can pause to delve into the deeper meanings of these selected landmark events and explore their wider context in the great historical narrative.

By studying a crucial episode in history, the student becomes aware that choices had to be made by real human beings, that those decisions were the result of specific factors, and that they set in motion a series of historical consequences. We have selected dramatic moments that best bring alive that decision-making process. We hope that through this approach, your students will realize that history is an ongoing, open-ended process, and that the decisions they make today create the conditions of tomorrow’s history.

Our teaching units are based on primary sources, government documents, artifacts, magazines, newspapers, films, private correspondence, literature, contemporary photographs, and paintings from the period under study. What we hope to achieve using primary source documents in these lessons is to remove the distance that students feel from historical events and to connect them more intimately with the past. In this way we hope to recreate for your students a sense of “being there,” a sense of seeing history through the eyes of the very people who were making decisions. This will help your students develop historical empathy, to realize that history is not an impersonal process divorced from real people like themselves. At the same time, by analyzing primary sources, students will actually practice the historian’s craft, discovering for themselves how to analyze evidence, establish a valid interpretation and construct a coherent narrative in which all the relevant factors play a part.

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

Within this unit, you will find: Teaching Background Materials, including Unit Overview, Unit Context, Correlation to the National Standards for History Unit, Objectives, Introduction to *Avengeing Angel? John Brown, the Harpers Ferry Raid and the “Irrepressible” Conflict*, A Dramatic Moment; and Lesson Plans with Student Resources. This unit, as we have said above, focuses on certain key moments in time and should be used as a supplement to your customary course materials. Although these lessons are recommended for use by secondary students, they can be adapted for other grade levels.

Introduction

The Teacher Background section should provide you with a good overview of the entire unit and with the historical information and context necessary to link the specific Dramatic Moment to the larger historical narrative. You may consult it for your own use, and you may choose to share it with students if they are of a sufficient grade level to understand the materials.

The Lesson Plans include a variety of ideas and approaches for the teacher which can be elaborated upon or cut as you see the need. These lesson plans contain student resources which accompany each lesson. The resources consist of primary source documents, any handouts or student background materials, and a bibliography.

In our series of teaching units, each collection can be taught in several ways. You can teach all of the lessons offered on any given topic, or you can select and adapt the ones that best support your particular course needs. We have not attempted to be comprehensive or prescriptive in our offerings, but rather to give you an array of enticing possibilities for in-depth study, at varying grade levels. We hope that you will find the lesson plans exciting and stimulating for your classes. We also hope that your students will never again see history as a boring sweep of inevitable facts and meaningless dates but rather as an endless treasure of real life stories and an exercise in analysis and reconstruction.

TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

I. UNIT OVERVIEW

John Brown remains a fascinating enigma in American history, and his abolitionist activities, culminating in the Harpers Ferry raid, continue to occupy a central place in the literature dealing with the coming of the Civil War. Brown's willingness to use force to achieve his antislavery goals continues both to fascinate and repel readers. A strict Calvinist in faith who fathered twenty children, Brown was an unsuccessful businessman, whose activities often traversed the boundary of ethical behavior and moral propriety. By age fifty-five, Brown remained an obscure, unsuccessful, and rather ordinary figure, with little to distinguish him from scores of his fellow Americans at the time.

His bold activities in the Kansas civil war – “bleeding Kansas” – changed all that, and made him a hero to many northern abolitionists, both white and black, who were convinced that moral suasion had merely played into the hands of the “slavocracy.” A radical abolitionist, Brown's assertiveness, coolness under fire, fearlessness, and willingness to resort to force to achieve his objectives commended him to northern abolitionists who believed only force could stem the tide of the slave power.

Although Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry proved inept and was quickly suppressed by local militia forces and federal troops commanded by Robert E. Lee, his remarkable final days between his capture on October 19, 1859 and execution on December 2, 1859, made him a legend in the North, and a devil incarnate in the South. In a commemorative speech in 1881, Frederick Douglass stated: “If John Brown did not end the war that ended slavery, he did at least begin the war that ended slavery.” Brown's revolutionary actions at Harpers Ferry and subsequent articulation of his antislavery views accelerated the “irrepressible conflict” between North and South and set the nation on its course toward civil war. Brown recognized that his actions would result in armed conflict between North and South and believed such a course to be the only way to eradicate the evil of slavery. As he wrote in his last message before his execution, “I, John Brown am now quite *certain* that the crimes of this *guilty land*: will never be purged away; but with Blood. I had *as I now think*: vainly flattered myself that without *very much* bloodshed; it might be done.”

II. UNIT CONTEXT

This unit deals with the continuing struggle between proslavery and antislavery proponents in the years exacerbating sectional discord and culminating in secession of the Southern states and Civil War. The lessons would most appropriately be taught as a prelude to the Civil War and a culmination of the heightened sectional conflict resulting from passage of the Fugitive Slave Law (1850), the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854), “Bleeding Kansas” (1855-56), and the Dred Scott decision (1857). The unit provides a

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variety of perspectives on John Brown's Harpers Ferry Raid and the ensuing historical interpretation of his character and purpose.

III. CORRELATION TO THE NATIONAL HISTORY STANDARDS

This unit correlates to **Era 5, Standard 1** of the *National History Standards*, Basic Edition (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996). It provides students an understanding of how the increasing sectional polarization between North and South and the heated acrimony over the slavery issue accelerated extremists on both sides to adopt policies and actions to advance their values and beliefs. In addition, it poses the more fundamental question concerning under what circumstances an individual's moral beliefs and religious values, take precedence over the rule of law and political compromise characteristic of democratic societies.

IV. UNIT OBJECTIVES

Students will:

1. Analyze John Brown's motives and beliefs for the decision to invade Harpers Ferry and seize the federal arsenal.
2. Explore how John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry exacerbated sectional tensions and contributed to the coming of the Civil War.
3. Analyze John Brown's statements following his capture at Harpers Ferry and evaluate their historical accuracy by comparing his account to the historical record.
4. Interpret textual, photographic, and graphic images in their historical context.
5. Evaluate how the paintings and illustrations of John Brown have influenced the interpretation of his actions and determine whether they portray him as a martyr or devil.

V. LESSON PLANS

Lesson One: John Brown: The Visionary

Lesson Two: John Brown: The Fanatic

Lesson Three: John Brown: The Image

Lesson Four: The Historical John Brown

VI. HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION TO AVENGING ANGEL? JOHN BROWN, THE HARPERS FERRY RAID AND THE "IRREPRESSIBLE" CONFLICT

"How did a singularly unsuccessful fifty-nine-year-old, Connecticut-born tanner turned surveyor, sheep-raiser, and land speculator, who twice married and sired twenty children, become one of history's most successful martyrs?" asks Lacey Baldwin Smith.¹ To his supporters and sympathizers, John Brown was a Christian martyr who sacrificed his life for the emancipation of African Americans. To his opponents, Brown symbolized a deranged fanatic willing to inaugurate a bloody servile insurrection to advance his bloodthirsty design. To many of his contemporaries John Brown was a hard-headed, cold-hearted, inner-directed fanatic who balanced a rigid adherence to Old Testament values with a more flexible quest for affluence. Throughout his adult life Brown exhibited a dismal lack of business acumen and a tortured sense of God's terrible wrath and divine justice. A failure at every business venture he tried, Brown was frequently in debt and had difficulty providing sustenance for his growing family. A risk-taker, he repeatedly involved himself in schemes to secure a more solid financial footing, but time and circumstances negated his efforts. Over twenty years, he experienced repeated business failures. Contrary to the daily piety he exhibited in reading and studying the Bible, praying for forgiveness and enlightenment, and shepherding his family, Brown played fast and loose with the ethics of commercial and business exchange. Business associates provide eloquent testimony to Brown's lack of judgment, stubbornness, and propensity for failure.

John Brown was born in Torrington, Connecticut on May 9, 1800, the son of Owen and Ruth Mills Brown. A simple, hard-working and God-fearing family, the Browns instilled strong religious and antislavery values in John and his siblings. At age five, John and his family moved to Hudson, Ohio, twenty-five miles south of Cleveland. The Western Reserve was a hotbed of abolitionism, and Owen Brown became a leading citizen of the community and a benefactor of Oberlin College.

At age eight, John Brown experienced a devastating loss in the death of his mother and neither accepted nor developed an emotional attachment to his stepmother. It is likely that Brown's mother, like his maternal grandmother earlier, died insane. An indifferent student with little formal education and training, Brown left school early to work in his father's tannery. During the War of 1812, he supplied beef to American military forces, at times rounding up steers and driving them a hundred miles to army encampments along Lake Erie. His experiences during the war with undisciplined militiamen, prone to profanity-laced conversation and other un-Christianlike conduct, forever soured Brown on the fighting strength or efficiency of military forces. It was during the war that Brown experienced an incident that shaped his antislavery proclivities. A young black slave around the same age as Brown was beaten with an iron shovel

¹ Lacey Baldwin Smith, "John Brown: 'Let Them Hang Me' " in Smith, *Fools, Martyrs, Traitors: The Story of Martyrdom in the Western World* (New York: Knopf, 1997), p. 229.

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by his master. Brown was appalled by the brutality of the event and the realization of the utter helplessness of the young slave.

Brown briefly studied for the ministry in Massachusetts and Connecticut, but a shortage of funds and an eye infection terminated his preparation. At age twenty he married Dianthe Lusk, a plain but pious young lady, and opened a tanning business in eastern Ohio. Over the next thirty-five years, Brown failed at over twenty businesses in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and New York, while engaged as a tanner, surveyor, cattle and sheep raiser, land speculator, wool merchant, postmaster and farmer. Throughout his adult life Brown struggled endlessly to feed and provide for his growing family, but experienced great hardship and want as a result of his repeated business failures. His first wife and three-day-old son died in 1832. Brown had fathered seven children in twelve years, but two of his sons had died. He married sixteen-year-old Mary Ann Day less than a year later and fathered thirteen additional children. An epidemic of dysentery swept through his household in September 1843, taking the lives of four of his children in succession. In all, nine of his twenty children died before reaching adulthood. Despite the personal tragedy he experienced, Brown remained steadfast in his religious convictions and antislavery views. There is much testimony throughout his life of his hostility to slavery and kindness and assistance to African Americans. In Ohio and Pennsylvania he assisted the "Underground Railroad" in spiriting escaped slaves to freedom and for a time even contemplated opening a school for blacks. As early as 1847 he outlined the substance of his plan to Frederick Douglass to launch a revolutionary insurrection to eradicate slavery in the South. But the time was not yet propitious to strike and Brown was subsequently involved in a series of lawsuits, litigation, and court appearances from 1851 to 1854.

Brown's first foray at striking a blow against slavery came in Kansas in 1856. The Fugitive Slave Law, part of the Compromise of 1850, had antagonized many Northerners because it made them potential accomplices to the recovery of escaped slaves. In 1851 he founded the League of Gileadites in Springfield, Massachusetts, organizing whites, free blacks, and escaped slaves to resist enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law "with the sword." The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 and its revocation of the Missouri Compromise line alienated Northerners further and created a major conflict in the new territory of Kansas, opened to settlers of both slaveholders and free-soilers under the provision of popular sovereignty. Five of Brown's sons had journeyed to Kansas in order to establish homesteads in the new territory and were soon caught up in the "free state" cause. Resisting efforts of "border ruffians" from Missouri to intimidate free-state settlers and secure control of the territory for the extension of slavery, the Browns joined the free state militia and summoned their father to assist them. John Brown journeyed to Kansas with his son Oliver and son-in-law Henry Thompson and a wagonload of arms, munitions, and supplies. Brown soon gained notoriety as a leader of a military company able and willing to wage war on slaveholders and their allies. The resulting civil war in Kansas was resplendent with atrocities on both sides, earning the territory the name of "Bleeding Kansas."