

# Avengeing Angel?

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

A Unit of Study for Grades 9–12

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## Introduction

Approach and Rationale . . . . .	1
Content and Organization . . . . .	1

## Teacher Background Materials

I. Unit Overview . . . . .	3
II. Unit Context . . . . .	3
III. Correlation to the National Standards for United States History . . . . .	4
IV. Unit Objectives . . . . .	4
V. Lesson Plans . . . . .	4
VI. Historical Introduction to <i>Avenging Angel? John Brown, the Harpers Ferry Raid and the “Irrepressible” Conflict</i> . . . . .	5

Dramatic Moment . . . . .	9
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## Lessons

Lesson I: John Brown: The Visionary . . . . .	10
Lesson II: John Brown: The Fanatic . . . . .	35
Lesson III: John Brown: The Image . . . . .	78
Lesson IV: The Historical John Brown . . . . .	87

Annotated Bibliography . . . . .	107
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## 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

## ***Teacher Background Materials***

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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

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## LESSON THREE

### JOHN BROWN: THE IMAGE

#### A. OBJECTIVES

- ◆ To analyze the purpose and effect of the visual images of John Brown.
- ◆ To evaluate works of art and visual images as historical documents.

#### B. LESSON ACTIVITIES

- (1) Place students in cooperative learning groups and distribute the set of the visual images of John Brown (**Documents 3A–3D**): John Brown without Beard; John Brown with Beard, May 1859; The Last Moments of John Brown by Thomas Hovenden; and, John Brown Mural by John Stewart Curry. Ask students to complete the Art Analysis Worksheets (**Student Handout 6**).
- (2) Reconvene the class and review the answers to the worksheet. Each group should report its answers.
- (3) After reviewing the answers to the worksheet have the students read the following excerpt reported by an “Eyewitness to the Hanging of John Brown,” *American Heritage*, February 1955:

Old Brown. . . was fifty-nine years old. He wore the same shabby black suit he had worn at Harpers Ferry and at his trial, the black contrasting vividly with the white shirt and socks and his incongruous red slippers. His frame was tall but gaunt now almost to emaciation . . . His unflinching gray eyes . . . were serious . . . he showed no fear. His demeanor was characterized by an unexpected serenity.

Now they were there. A group of soldiers surrounded the wagon and the scaffold. They allowed no one to come between them and the prisoner. Pickets were posted at various points, and the crowd was held back at bayonet point nearly a quarter of a mile from the gallows. . . . The elaborate security precautions were not necessary. The crowd was quite orderly. They had not come to rescue John Brown. They had come to see him die. . . . The earth immediately about the scaffold was bare. The prisoner . . . turned and ascended the steps to the gallows. . . He shook hands with sheriff James Campbell and jailer John Avis. . . .

Discussion questions:

- How does the above account compare with the Hovenden painting of John Brown? Was the painting inaccurate? Why or why not? What was the reason for the painting? Can the painting be used as an historical document? Why or why not?
- How does each of the visuals appeal to emotions? Explain.
- Which of the visual images do you feel best portrays John Brown? Why? Is Brown best considered a freedom fighter – a human sacrifice for the freedom of fellow humans? Or, is he best viewed as a fanatical murderer? Why?

**PHOTO OF JOHN BROWN WITHOUT BEARD**



*National Park Association*

Photo portrait of John Brown without his beard, taken prior to the raid on Harpers Ferry.



**PHOTO OF JOHN BROWN WITH BEARD**



*National Park Association*

Portrait of John Brown, from the Bowman Gallery, Ottawa, Illinois.

**THOMAS HOVENDEN PAINTING: THE LAST MOMENTS OF JOHN BROWN**



*National Park Association*

Copy of an 1884 oil painting showing John Brown leaving the Charlestown jail on his way to be hanged on December 2, 1859. The image of Brown kissing an African-American child, depicted by artist Thomas Hovenden, never occurred.

**JOHN STEWART CURRY PAINTING: THE TRAGIC PRELUDE MURAL**



*National Archives (NWDNS-79-CWC-3F(10))*

Copy of a mural by John Stewart Curry in the State Capitol in Topeka, Kansas, circa 1937-42.

**ART ANALYSIS WORKSHEET**

**Document 3A – John Brown without a Beard**

1. Which part of John Brown’s face do you focus on when looking at the picture? Why?

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2. What clues does the visual give you about John Brown’s character? Explain.

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**Document 3B – John Brown with a Beard, May 1859**

1. How does the beard alter John Brown’s features and appearance?

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2. Why do you suppose John Brown grew a beard before the raid? Explain your answer.

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**Document 3C – The Last Moments of John Brown, by Thomas Hovenden**

1. Study the people in the painting. Who is the focus of the painting? How do you know?

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2. Describe the relationship of the people in the painting to the central figure.

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3. Describe the expression of the central figure. Describe the reaction of the people around him.

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4. What is the main idea that the painter is trying to convey? How do you know?

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**Document 3D – John Brown Mural by John Stewart Curry**

1. Who are the people in the painting? Describe their relationship to John Brown.

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2. How would you describe the size of John Brown in relationship to the others in the painting? Why do you suppose Curry painted it that way?

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3. How would you describe the look on John Brown’s face? Explain.

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4. What is the painter’s view of John Brown? How do you know?

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