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

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INCLUDING THE COMPLETE FIRST LESSON

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Avenging 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

Avenging 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 in 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 Avenging 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
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. 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.

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 spiritng 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.”
May 1856 proved the climax. On May 19 and 20 Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts delivered a vitriolic speech in the United States Senate entitled “The Crime Against Kansas.” Sumner called for the immediate admission of Kansas to the Union as a free state and denounced in very personal terms Senators Stephen Douglas of Illinois (chief supporter and sponsor of the Kansas-Nebraska Act), Andrew Pierce Butler of South Carolina, and James Mason of Virginia. On May 21, an army of proslavery men rode into Lawrence, Kansas, destroyed the offices of two newspapers and threw their presses into the river, burned down the hotel and the house of the free state “governor,” and pillaged the stores. The following day, May 22, Senator Butler’s cousin, Representative Preston Brooks of South Carolina, found Sumner alone at his desk in the Senate chamber writing letters. Brooks attacked Sumner hitting him repeatedly over the head with a cane until restrained by several men coming to the Massachusetts senator’s aid. Sumner did not return to the Senate for three years. Reading about these events in Kansas, John Brown “went crazy.” On the evening of May 24-25, he led a party including four other men and two of his sons along the Pottawatomie Creek. Seizing five proslavery men from their cabins, Brown’s army murdered them in cold blood with broadswords. The so-called Pottawatomie Massacre contributed to full-scale war in Kansas, with over 200 deaths in the remainder of 1856 alone. One of Brown’s sons, Frederick, was murdered and two others, John, Jr. and Jason, suffered horribly. Brown, however, remained unscathed, and hid his involvement in the Pottawatomie killings from his northern supporters. He triumphantly returned to the East in order to raise money and arms for the war against slavery.

Brown preached to abolitionist audiences throughout the Northeast arguing that no amount of moral suasion could end slavery. Stressing the sanctity of the Bible and the Declaration of Independence, he told Ralph Waldo Emerson “better that a whole generation of men, women and children should pass away by a violent death than that a word of either should be violated in this country.”2 In the autumn of 1857, Brown began recruiting his army for the Harpers Ferry Raid. Without disclosing the actual details of his plan, Brown let it be known that he intended to resist the aggression of the slave power and would begin his revolution in Virginia. In May 1858, Brown called a constitutional convention and summoned his followers to meet in Chatham, Ontario, Canada. Thirty-four blacks attended the convention and under Brown’s direction unani-

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Teacher Background Materials

mously adopted a “Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the People of the United States.” The document was to serve as the provisional constitution of the United States as a new government was established. Brown was elected “Commander in Chief” of the provisional army and other officers were sworn in. At the conclusion of the convention, Brown returned to New England to raise funds for his campaign, and sent one of his followers, John E. Cook, to Harpers Ferry to reconnoiter and provide information to him.

Brown was well-known to a large coterie of prominent Northern abolitionists, both white and black, including Frederick Douglass, Martin Delany, Harriet Tubman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, William Lloyd Garrison, Julia Ward Howe, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. His chief financial supporters were a secret group of six men, Samuel Gridley Howe, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Theodore Parker, Franklin B. Sanborn, Gerrit Smith, and George Luther Stearns. Theodore Parker, a leading Unitarian minister, was the grandson of Captain John Parker who commanded the minutemen at Lexington in 1775.

Brown arrived in the area of Harpers Ferry in early July 1859. He rented the Kennedy Farm, about five miles from Harpers Ferry on the Maryland side, posing as a farmer named “Isaac Smith.” Over the next several weeks men and supplies arrived at the farmhouse, via Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. On the night of October 16, 1859, Brown gave the signal to his twenty-one followers, and launched the raid on the Federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia.
**Dramatic Moment**

On November 2, 1859, jurors took but forty-five minutes to find John Brown guilty of treason. The clerk of the Court asked Brown if he had anything to say before sentence was pronounced. Brown stood and in a deeply moving address to the Court, declared:

I have, may it please the Court, a few words to say. In the first place, I deny everything but what I have all along admitted—a design on my part to free the slaves. I certainly intended to have made a clean thing of that matter, as I did last winter when I went into Missouri and there took slaves without the snapping of a gun on either side, and landed them safe in Canada. That was all I intended. I never did intend murder, or treason, or the destruction of property, or to incite slaves to rebel.

I have another objection. Had I interfered in the manner which I admit has been fairly proved—had I interfered in behalf of the rich and powerful, or any of their friends, it would have been all right. Every man in this room would have deemed it an act worthy of reward rather than of punishment. I say I am yet too young to understand that God is any respecter of persons. I believe that to have interfered as I have done, in behalf of His despised poor, was not wrong, but right.

This Court acknowledges, as I suppose, the validity of the Law of God. I see a book kissed, which I suppose to be the Bible, which teaches me that all things whatsoever I would that men should do to me I should do even so unto them. It teaches me also to remember them in bonds as bound with them. I have endeavored to act up to these instructions.

Now if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life and mingle my blood with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded, I say, let it be done!

Let me say one word further. I feel entirely satisfied with the treatment I have received on my trial. Considering all the circumstances, it has been more generous than I expected. I admire the candor and truthfulness of the witnesses. But I feel no consciousness of guilt! Now I have done.

Judge Richard Parker then declared:

John Brown, the evidence has shown, and the jury has found, that there is no reasonable doubt as to your guilt under the indictment. Therefore, the since the jury has adjudged you guilty, the sentence of the Law is that you shall be hanged by the neck until you be dead, and that the execution of this judgment be made and done in public on Friday, the second of December next. And may God have mercy on your soul.

**Lesson One**  
**John Brown: The Visionary**

**A. Objectives**

- Explain the reasons for John Brown’s raid.
- Analyze the justification for his actions and their impact.
- Analyze the relationship between John Brown and Frederick Douglass.

**B. Lesson Activities**

1. Have students read the letter from Annie Brown Adams to Garibaldi Ross (Document 1A) and complete the Written Document Analysis Worksheet (Student Handout 1).

2. Conduct a Reader’s Theater on “John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid” (Document 1B). Choose 18 students to play each of the parts of the narrative. The students should sit in the front of the room while they are reading their parts. As the students listen to the enactment, they should be directed to jot down the point of view of each of the characters in the dialogue using Student Handout 2 (Notetaking Form).

   After the presentation use the questions at the end of the Reader’s Theater (page ) as a guide for class discussion.

3. Students should study the pictorial documents on Harpers Ferry:

   - The Maps of Harpers Ferry (Document 1C)
   - The 1859 View of Lower Harpers Ferry (Document 1D)
   - The Interior of the Engine House (Document 1E)

   The students then can be asked to reconstruct the raid bringing together the information from the Reader’s Theater (Document 1B), the maps (Document 1C), and the pictorial documents (Documents 1D and 1E).

   Class discussion questions:

   - Why did John Brown choose Harpers Ferry as the place to begin his revolution?
   - How should the choice be evaluated? Foolish? Wise? Other? Why?
(4) Have students read “The Last Meeting between Frederick Douglass and John Brown” (Document 1F). Answer the questions with a partner using the “Pair and Share” Technique. This involves students answering the questions separately, sharing their answers with a partner, and having the answers agreed with, disagreed with and/or modified until one answer has been developed between the pairs.

“Pair and Share” discussion questions:

1. Why did Douglass refuse to join John Brown in the Harpers Ferry raid?

2. According to Douglass, how did Brown’s men initially react to his declared intention to seize the Federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry?

3. According to Douglass, how had Brown altered his original plan for going into Virginia?

4. How did Brown justify his decision to seize the Federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry? Why did Douglass oppose the plan?

5. How did Brown intend to insure his escape from Harpers Ferry?

Review the pairs’ answers and then have the class discuss:

• Was Frederick Douglass justified in not participating in Harpers Ferry? Why or Why not?

(5) Final Discussion: Using the information from the pictures, the Reader’s Theater and the “Last Meeting Between Frederick Douglass and John Brown,” ask students to discuss:

Was the Raid on Harpers Ferry Necessary? Why or Why Not?

Ask Students to complete the Discussion Form (Student Handout 3) at the conclusion of the discussion.
ANNIE BROWN ADAMS TO GARIBALDI ROSS, DECEMBER 15, 1887

All members of the Brown family did not share John Brown's ardor for his campaign in Virginia. His wife, three of his six sons, and his son-in-law did not join Brown at Harpers Ferry. The three sons who accompanied him, Owen, Oliver, and Watson, were in fact dismayed when they realized that their father intended to seize the federal arsenal and armory at Harpers Ferry. Annie Brown Adams' letter provides evidence that not all members of the family favored the enterprise. Jason and Salmon Brown refused to support the plan while John Brown, Jr. remained in Ohio raising money and supplies for his father. Salmon later declared: “I did not want to go to Harpers Ferry very much. I said to the boys before they left: 'You know father. You know he will dally till he is trapped.’” [See, also, Stephen B. Oates, To Purge this Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 272.]

Annie Brown Adams to Garibaldi Ross, December 15, 1887:

My father and two brothers, Owen and Oliver, John Henry Kagi and Jerry G. Anderson went down to Harpers Ferry some time in June to prepare for and get a place that would be quiet and secluded where they could receive their freight and men. They rented Kennedy Farm situated about five miles north of Harpers Ferry as that seemed in all respects perfectly adapted to their purpose . . . . It was far enough from neighbors to seclude us, in a quiet woodsy place, less than a half mile from the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Maryland, about two miles from Antietam and six miles from Sharpsburg — afterwards noted battlegrounds during the War . . .

After my father had selected his place, he found out . . . that he would be obliged to have some woman to help him, to stand between him and the curiosity of outsiders. . . . So he sent Oliver back to North Elba after Mother and I. Never dreaming that Mother would not go. Oliver’s girl wife, Martha and I went back with him. Martha was sixteen and I was fifteen years old then. . . .

I will first describe John Brown, not the one the world knew, but my father as I knew him. He was very strict in his ideas of discipline. We all knew from our earliest infancy that we must obey him. . . .

We commenced housekeeping at Kennedy Farm sometime in July . . . . Our family at that time consisted of six persons. . . . Then followed the rest — one, two three and four at a time. These last arrivals all came secretly by way of Chambersburg, Father, and some of the rest going there with a light covered wagon, in which they rode or else walked a part of the way. They would hide in the woods and come in to the house before daylight in the morning or else after dark at night. They all lived upstairs over the dining room, coming down at their meals, and at any time that there were strangers or visitors about. . . .

Questions for discussion of **Document 1A**:

1. Why did Annie and Martha Brown agree to join John Brown at the Kennedy Farm in the summer of 1859?

2. Why did Brown decide to rent the Kennedy Farm?

3. What role did Chambersburg, Pennsylvania play in the enterprise?
READERS’ THEATER:
JOHN BROWN & THE HARPERS FERRY RAID

The following Reader’s Theater exercise tells the story of the Harpers Ferry Raid from John Brown’s perspective. The actual words assigned to the characters were spoken or written by the historical figures represented in the excerpts, although some of the words were written or spoken after the events described. In particular, the reader should compare Brown’s perspective with those of other witnesses to the events at Harpers Ferry, such as the following accounts offered by Robert E. Lee and in Senator James Mason’s majority report to the United States Senate in 1860.

Jefferson Davis: The Black Republicans were trying to push us to the brink. They were a sectional party incorporating the lunatic abolitionists and were implacable enemies of the South—a sectional party which was now plotting our ruin. They were determined to encircle us with free territories and free states in a heinous effort to strangle us into submission. They were determined to turn the North against us and precipitate a war of sections so that they could free the Negroes and put them on top of whites in the South.

In June, 1858, on the very day Congress adjourned, Lincoln, the Black Republican candidate for Douglas’s Senate seat, gave a violent abolitionist speech before a convention of Republican zealots. Lincoln declared that this country could not remain half slave and half free, and called for a war of extermination against the South and its domestic institutions.

Abraham Lincoln: “A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the House to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward, till it shall become alike lawful in all the States, old as well as new—North as well as South.”

John Brown: It’s too late to settle the slave question through politics, conventions, or any other peaceful means. It was late winter [1858] and I was pacing back and forth in Gerrit Smith’s mansion in Peterboro, New York. “There’s no recourse left to the black man,” I said, “but in God and a massive slave uprising in which the blood of slaveholders will be spilled. This is a terrible thing, but slavery is a terrible wrong, the same as murder, and the unrepentant southerners deserve to be violently punished for their sins.”

Jefferson Davis: You ask, why did we argue the right to take slaves into Kansas and the other western territories? Was that not a barren, theoretical right? I believed that
slave labor could be adapted to the gold and silver mines and the cattle ranches of the Southwest—the Spaniards had employed Indian slaves in such enterprises in their conquest of Mexico. I was all for buying Cuba and annexing Mexico and other tropical regions where our slave-based agriculture could thrive; manufacturing had an equal right to go there, too, of course. The point is, we needed to extend slavery because of the war that was being made against our institutions; because of the want of security which resulted from the action of our bitter foes in the northern states.

**John Brown:** God has raised me to deliver the slaves from Egypt. It’s His will that I invade Virginia, the queen of the slave states, and provoke a massive slave rebellion with a guerrilla army I’m now raising. From Virginia we’ll sweep southward through the southern mountains in a whirlwind of bullets and bayonets, pikes, and axes. The balance of the slave states will nearly conquer themselves, there being such a large number of Negroes in them. To prevent anarchy, I intend to establish a provisional government in the territory we conquer. I’ve drafted a constitution for such a government. It provides for a commander-in-chief of the army, a president, vice-president, a supreme court, and a one-house Congress.

**Franklin Sanborn:** It’s an amazing proposition! But I’ve got to admit I have some doubts. The plot is . . . sounds . . . well, rather fantastic. Desperate in character, inadequately planned. And what will the result be for certain?

**John Brown:** Even if the insurrection fails, it will cause such convulsions that the North and the South cannot remain together in the Union. Southerners will see a northern conspiracy behind it, just as they did behind Nat Turner’s slave revolt, and will demand retribution. I believe that even a failed insurrection will cause such a violent quake that the entire temple will come crashing down, and slavery with it. I should then have effected a mighty conquest, like the last victory of Samson. Only through insurrection and war can this slave-cursed Republic be restored to the principles of the Declaration of Independence. I for one am ready to die to bring it about.

**Franklin Sanborn:** Noble sentiments, Captain Brown, but . . .

**John Brown:** [interrupting Sanborn] If God be for us, who can be against us? I’ll carry on without you if you’ve got no faith in me.

**Franklin Sanborn:** You leave us only the alternatives of betrayal, desertion, or support. [At this point Sanborn and Gerrit Smith go for a walk in the snowy hills to talk Brown’s proposition over. After returning, the conversation with Brown continues:]

**Gerrit Smith:** We cannot give you up to die alone. We will support you. I’ll raise all the money I can for you, and Frank here will lay the case before your friends in Massachusetts—Reverend [Theodore] Parker, Dr. [Samuel Gridley] Howe, George Stearns, and Reverend Thomas Wentworth Higginson. I can see no other way.
**John Brown**: Young Sanborn communicated the enterprise to my Massachusetts friends; and in March I met with all five of them in a Boston hotel: Higginson, the tall, stiff-backed, belligerent clergyman from Worcester; Parker, the coughing, blood-and-thunder Unitarian who’d sided with me in my argument with [William Lloyd] Garrison; Stearns, the long-bearded merchant who always wore a soft hat and liked to give money to benevolent causes; Sanborn, the ardent smooth-faced young schoolteacher and secretary of the Massachusetts Kansas Committee; and Dr. Howe, the colorful man of causes who’d fought in the Greek Revolution against Turkey. I repeated what I’d told Sanborn and Smith: that I was an instrument in God’s hands to invade the South and destroy its wicked institution by the sword. If the insurrection can hold its ground for a few days, the whole country from the Potomac to Savannah will be ablaze.

**Thomas Wentworth Higginson**: I have long advocated disunion to get rid of the slavery curse and have predicted that a revolution is coming.

**Theodore Parker**: Your plan, Captain Brown, accords with my belief and support of violent resistance to the Slave Power.

**Samuel Gridley Howe**: I, too, have long called for some move of actual force against the slave power.

**John Brown**: Only a sectional Armageddon will destroy slavery. Even if the insurrection attempt fails, it will shake this country to its foundations, divide North and South beyond hope of compromise, and bring on war, gentleman, a maelstrom of violence in which slavery itself will perish. To atone for the crime of slavery, this entire generation of men, women, and children may well be swept away.

**Theodore Parker**: Yes, yes, you’re quite right. Only civil war can settle this matter. I’ve said so for years.

[The others nodded in agreement]

**John Brown**: Ah, these brave reformers liked the idea of the United States passing through the ordeal of civil war, of an unrepentant South in flames, in order that the slavery curse might be removed at last. With Gerrit Smith, they formed a Secret Committee of Six to raise $1,000 for the “experiment” and to serve as my “advisers.” I wanted their money; not their advice—I took advice from nobody. I then traveled across the East talking to black leaders, trying to drum up support. I met my black friend, Rev. Jermain W. Loguen, in Syracuse. He had escaped slavery in Tennessee. Loguen took me to St. Catherines, Canada, a haven for escaped slaves, where I sought out Harriet Tubman. She was called “Black Moses” because she’d stolen into the land of Egypt eight times and delivered sixty slaves to freedom. Higginson said there was a $12,000 reward for her in Maryland, and claimed “she will probably be burned alive if she is caught.” Tall and powerfully built, she was the most of a man naturally I ever met. She had sharp, brilliant eyes and a deep voice, and carried scars on her neck, head, and back from her own days under the lash in Maryland.
**Lesson One**

**Harriet Tubman:** There’s a war comin’, Mr. Brown. They can say peace all they like, but I know it’s goin’ to be war.

**John Brown:** Then you’ll like what I’ve come to tell you. [I then confided my plan in full. She promised to do “missionary work” for me among the thousand fugitives in St. Catherines, and then join me in the South when I gave the signal. I then issued a call for black leaders to meet me in secret convention at Chatham, Canada, about forty miles above Detroit, where I would complete my preparations. Then I would strike.

**Narrator:** Brown’s secret convention took place in the spring of 1858 in the engine house of a black fire-fighting company. Brown and twelve recruits showed up, as did 36 Negro delegates. Neither Frederick Douglass nor Jermain Loguen appeared and Brown was very disappointed. The free-born Martin Delany, an editor and abolitionist orator who had studied medicine at Harvard, and worked with Douglass on the North Star showed up. Delany now championed colonization for American Negroes, on the grounds that America was too Negrophobic for blacks to live there in the freedom they deserved.

**Martin Delany:** Captain Brown, would you state your objectives?

**John Brown:** For 20 or 30 years it has been my greatest and principal object to liberate the slaves. Gradually a plan formed in my mind for mountain warfare in the South. To prepare myself, I studied the Spartacus gladiator revolt against the Romans, Toussaint Louverture’s slave war on Santo Domingo in the seventeen nineties, and Nat Turner’s revolt in Virginia. I consider Nat Turner a great American hero, greater than George Washington. As I studied these uprisings, a plan of action emerged spontaneously in my mind. I went to Kansas to gain a footing for the furtherance of this matter, and from then on I’ve devoted my whole being, mental, moral, and physical, all that I have and am to the extinction of slavery. I’m convinced that southern slaves are ripe for rebellion. At the first sign of a leader, they’ll immediately rise all over the southern states. Gentlemen, I am that leader. My company — twelve of them are standing beside me now — will invade Virginia, in the region of the Blue Ridge mountains, and march into Tennessee and northern Alabama, where the slaves will swarm to us. We’ll then wage war upon the plantations on the plains west and east of the mountains, which will serve as the base of operations.

**Black Delegate:** But what if troops are brought against you?

**John Brown:** A small force trained in guerrilla warfare can easily defend those Thermopylae ravines against southern militia and the U.S. Army. I expect thousands of free Negroes in the northern states to join me once the invasion begins.

**Narrator:** Brown then read the constitution that would create a new provisional government once the slaves were freed to the convention. He would serve as commander in chief, with John Henry Kagi, his most trusted recruit, as secretary of war. The pre-
amble of his constitution declared *war* against slavery because slavery was a perpetual *state of war* against black people. After considerable debate over the constitution, Delany and the other delegates approved and signed it unanimously. Some of the blacks then joined Brown in singing, *Go down Moses, way down in Egypt land. Tell ole Pharoah, to let my people go.*

**John Brown:** Yes, Lord God, yes. I am your destroyer, I am your sword of vengeance. I will make the whole land desolate and waste to the cities until not an inhabitant is left. But just as I was ready to move, God in His inscrutable wisdom placed thorns in my path. Loguen reported that Negroes who would go to war did not have the money “to get there with.” I was also nailed down for want of funds — so far the Six had sent me only about $600, and the money had melted away in expenses. Meanwhile, Hugh Forbes, the flighty drillmaster I’d enlisted for my flock of sheep, defected, went to Washington, and told what he knew about the conspiracy to several Republican politicians. The Secret Six were scandalized.

**Samuel Gridley Howe:** Senators Henry Wilson, John Hale, and William Seward, and God knows how many more, have heard about the plot.

**John Brown:** Of the Six, only the fighting Higginson wanted to go ahead. In a perfect panic, the other five voted to send me back to Kansas until things cooled off. They offered me an additional $2,000 or $3,000 as an inducement. Complaining bitterly about their cowardice, I stored my “tools” in a secret hideaway in Ohio and returned to the territory under a new alias, “Shubel Morgan.”

Over the winter I struck a blow for God and freedom that resounded across the land: my little army invaded Missouri and liberated eleven slaves and several horses from two enemy homesteads, nearly provoking another civil war along the Kansas-Missouri border. We escorted the blacks to the Canadian border and freedom, then hurried down to Cleveland where I auctioned the horses off. In a fund-raising lecture attended by reporters, I described the success of the slave-running expedition and pointed out, proudly, that the President had put a price of $250 on my head. I retaliated by putting a price of $2.50 on the *rotten* head of Buchanan. In the spring of 1859 I journeyed back to Boston and warned the Secret Six that it was time for war, there would be no more postponements.

**Frederick Douglass:** I met with Brown at his urging at an old stone quarry in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, where he revealed his plan to attack the Harpers Ferry arsenal.

**Narrator:** Harpers Ferry was a mountain town in northern Virginia where the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers meet. Brown had sent an advance agent, John E. Cook, into town several months earlier to gather information. Meanwhile, after meeting with the Secret Six in Boston and attending to additional business, Brown had rented an old two-story farmhouse about seven miles away from Harpers Ferry on the Maryland
side of the Potomac. He gave his name as “Smith” and told neighbors he was a cattle buyer from New York. Several recruits came with Brown, and others trickled in over the summer, including three of his sons, Oliver, Owen and Watson.

**John Brown:** I will attack the arsenal and confiscate all the government weapons, take hostages, and then strike south across the mountains.

**Frederick Douglass:** If you attack Federal property it’ll array the whole country against you. Old friend, listen to me. You’re going into a perfect steel-trap. Once in you’ll never get out alive. How can you rest on a reed so weak and broken? Virginia will blow you and your hostages sky-high.

**John Brown:** God is my guard and shield. I trust all to Him — He alone will determine the outcome. Come with me, Douglass. I’ll defend you with my life. I want you for a special purpose. When I strike, the bees will swarm, and I need you to help hive them.

**Frederick Douglass:** No, I will not go with you this time. The plan cannot work. You will raise the whole country against you by attacking federal property.

**Narrator:** Though Douglass refused to join Brown, his associate Shields Green decided to join Brown’s army. Several other recruits joined up in the next several weeks. On Sunday, October 16, 1859, Brown gathered up his small army of 16 whites and five Negroes. He explained: “We have only one life to live, and once to die; and if we lose our lives it’ll do more for the cause than our lives would be worth in any other way.” He stored his constitution, several well-marked maps of the South, and letters that incriminated the Secret Six, Frederick Douglass, Martin Delany, and several prominent Republicans in a carpetbag, which he left in a trunk inside the farmhouse, where it could be easily found. He later declared: “I was the stone God cast into the black pool of slavery, and I wanted the ripples to spread over as much of the North as possible, forcing everybody to take sides.”

**John Brown:** “Men,” I said, “get on your arms; we’ll proceed to the Ferry.” Leaving my son Owen and two others as a rear guard, I climbed into a wagon loaded with guns and pikes and led the men two by two into a damp moonless night. When the town lights came into view, I motioned to two raiders to fall out and cut the telegraph lines. Then I flung my little army across the bridge that led to Harpers Ferry, deploying several to guard the Potomac and Shenandoah bridges. Except for a few fugitives strolling the streets, the town was quiet. My men crept through the shadows of Potomac Street, and took the watchman at the government works by surprise. In the glare of torches, I told him: “I’m here in the name of Jehovah. I came from Kansas and intend to free all the Negroes in this state. If the citizens interfere with me I must burn the town and have blood.”

**Narrator:** Brown’s men quickly seized the government buildings and confiscated the weapons inside them. His son Owen, meanwhile, had moved the pikes to the schoolhouse near the Potomac where the slaves were to report, after hearing of his raid.
Cook, his advance agent, had assured Brown the slaves would come forward by the hundreds once word of the invasion spread. Around midnight, a detachment of raiders brought three white hostages into the armory yard, plus twelve liberated male slaves and several confiscated weapons. One hostage was Colonel Lewis Washington, a grand-grandnephew of George Washington.

**John Brown:** I wanted you particularly for the moral effect it would give our cause having a man of your name as a prisoner. I armed the slaves with pikes and told them to guard the prisoners. Among the weapons was a magnificent sword given to George Washington by Frederick the Great. I strapped it on, thinking it a fitting symbol for the war that had begun this night.

**Narrator:** Sometime that night, the Baltimore & Ohio train steamed into town from the west. Brown’s sentinels at the bridges, opened fire on the train. Fearing the shooting would arouse the town, Brown sent one of the blacks to tell his men to let the train go. But several sentinels questioned Brown’s decision fearing the alarm would be spread once the train reached the next town and the telegraph would alert the entire countryside.

**John Brown:** Shortly after telling my sentinels to stand firm, a church bell started tolling somewhere in the town. They were spreading the alarm! The bell tolled on and on—*insurrection. Insurrection*—tolling into the dawn. I scanned the overcast Heavens, whispering: “Lord, what do I do?” No word yet from Owen. We had to wait for him and the slaves—they could be as many as 1,500. Then, if it is God’s will we will vacate the town.

**Narrator:** Shortly after 8:00 a.m. some of the armory employees arrived for work, heedless of the tolling bell. They were taken prisoner and placed with the other hostages in the fire engine house. Gunfire soon erupted in the streets as militia troops began arriving.

**John Henry Kagi:** [By messenger] Captain Brown, you must order an evacuation while we can still fight our way to safety across the bridge. . .

**John Brown:** [By messenger] Tell Kagi and the others to stand firm. It was my settled policy not to do anything when I did not know what to do. A good course was sure to be safe in the hands of Jehovah. Bullets were now flying all around us, and more armed men were pouring across the bridge leading to Maryland. In all the gunfire, my son Oliver and another sentinel made it back to the armory, but several others had been killed. The speed with which the countryside had mobilized took me by surprise. . .

**Osborn Anderson** [a raider]: “What are we going to do, Captain? They got us surrounded. Can’t fight our way out now.”
**Lesson One**

**John Brown:** Can’t wait for Owen and the slaves, I thought. Must negotiate for a cease fire, offer to release the hostages if the militia will let us go free. I sent a raider, Will Thompson, out under a truce flag, but the scoundrels seized him and took him off at gunpoint. Ordering the remaining raiders to take cover in the little fire-engine house, I sent my son, Watson, and Aaron Stevens under a second white flag. But the mob gunned them both down. *Those miserable swine.* Watson managed to crawl back to the engine house, where he doubled up in agony at my feet. “Be brave, be a man,” I told him. . . .

**Narrator:** By late afternoon crowds of drunken men milled about in the streets firing indiscriminately and screaming obscenities at Brown and his men. They threatened to commit vile atrocities on the blacks with Brown. One of Brown’s men killed the mayor of the town. In retaliation, several townspeople dragged Will Thompson kicking and screaming toward the Potomac, where they quickly dispatched him. Additional reinforcements arrived throughout the remainder of the day and into the evening.

**John Brown:** Inside the engine house it was pitch dark and painfully cold as I took stock. Only four uninjured raiders were left, and eleven prisoners. Most of the liberated blacks had disappeared. One raider lay on the floor, dead. My son Oliver had also been shot, and he and Watson lay side by side, both choking and crying in pain. Exhausted from the fighting and lack of sleep, I paced back and forth, trying to think what to do, Washington’s sword swinging at my side. Oliver kept begging me to put him out of his agony and shoot him. I turned on him. “If you must die, die like a man.” Then I spun around to face the prisoners. “Gentlemen, if you knew of my past history you would not blame me for being here. I went to Kansas a peaceable man, and the proslavery people hunted me down like a wolf. I lost one of my sons [Frederick] there.” I stood trembling, then called to Oliver. There was no answer. “I guess he’s dead,” I said, and started pacing again.

**Narrator:** Federal troops under Colonel Robert E. Lee and Lieutenant J.E.B. Stuart had arrived during the night. As dawn spread, they deployed in the street, the first column armed with sledgehammers, the second with bayonets ready to assault the engine house. Stuart approached under a flag of truce.

**J.E.B. Stuart: [Speaking to Brown]** “I bear a note from Colonel Robert E. Lee.”

**Narrator:** He then reads the contents of the note stating the armory and its works were surrounded on all sides, that it was impossible for Brown and his men to escape, and demanding their immediate surrender.

**John Brown:** I reject the terms. I want reassurances that my men and my hostages can leave.” Stuart refused to alter the terms. Suddenly, he jumped back from the door and waved his hat three times, and the storming party rushed forward. I slammed the door and we opened fire on them through the gun holes and cracks in the building, but it was no use. The troops battered down one of the doors with a heavy ladder and
swarmed inside. Colonel Washington pointed at me and said: “This is Osawatomie.”
A sword-wielding officer leaped forward and struck me with such a savage thrust of
his weapon that it lifted me almost off the floor. Then he beat me with the hilt of his
sword until I slipped into blackness.

When I came to, I could not believe I was alive. I was lying on the grass outside the
engine house, cut and bleeding badly about the upper part of my body, but there was
no wound in my stomach where the blade had struck. The officer who had tried to kill
me was cursing his bad luck. “The blade must have hit his belt buckle. In my haste to
leave the barracks I took the dress sword instead of my battle sword.” Colonel Lee
bent over to look at my wounds and then called for a physician.

Narrator: Brown was placed under heavy guard while a lynch mob screamed for his
head. Later that afternoon, Gov. Henry Wise of Virginia, several officers, U.S. con-
gressmen and reporters interrogated Brown for three hours.

Interrogator: How can you justify your acts?

John Brown: I pity the poor in bondage that have none to help them. That is why I am
here; not to gratify any personal animosity, revenge, or vindictive spirit. It’s my sym-
pathy with the oppressed and the wronged, that are as good as you and as precious in
the sight of God. I wish to say, furthermore, that you had better—all you people of the
South—prepare yourselves for a settlement of that question that must come up for
settlement sooner than you’re prepared for it. You may dispose of me very easily; I’m
nearly disposed of now; but this question is still to be settled—this Negro question I
mean—the end of that is not yet.

Narrator: Brown was placed on trial for treason against the state of Virginia and tried
in nearby Charles Town, where he was sentenced to hang. Several of his friends tried
to save his life by petitioning the governor to declare him insane and commit him to an
asylum. But Brown rejected the ploy with contempt.

Avis [Brown’s jailer]: The authorities found your carpetbag of papers at the Kennedy
farmhouse. Most of your immediate backers have fled the country. You’ve caused a
hell of a ruckus. The town is full of troops. The entire state is on alert. They say you’re
an agent of the Black Republican Party—the vanguard of a mighty abolitionist army
being assembled in the North to destroy us. They say the irrepressible conflict is at
hand, and we should fight it out to the bitter end.

John Brown: I could have wept for joy. The apocalypse must surely be coming—I could
see it in my mind: a nation in flames, with Jehovah thundering his wrath over all. The
signs all pointed to His approaching fury. I could hear great commotion outside—the
clank of soldiers in the streets, and fearful cries on the wind. Night after night hay-
stacks and barns blazed beyond my barred window, lighting up the Heavens with a
flickering glare. Mr. Avis said they blamed the fires on northern agents and distracted
slaves. But I knew it was the work of Jehovah.
Lesson One

It’s now December 2nd—the day of my hanging, the day the gallows become my cross. I’m approaching those gallows while sitting on my coffin in the bed of a military wagon. Thank you, Father, for allowing an old man like me such mighty and soul-satisfying rewards. I’m ready to join thee now in Paradise. Hanging me won’t save them from God’s wrath! I warned them, I warned the entire country: I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away, but with blood.


Questions for discussion:

1. How do Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis differ on the slavery issue?

2. What does Lincoln mean when he says: “A House Divided against itself cannot stand? How would John Brown respond to Lincoln’s “House Divided” speech?

3. Why did John Brown decide to invade Harpers Ferry? How does he justify his plan?

4. Why did Brown temporarily abandon the Harpers Ferry raid and return to Kansas following the Chatham Convention? How did African Americans respond to Brown’s decision to invade Harpers Ferry?

5. Why did Brown temporarily abandon the Harpers Ferry raid and return to Kansas following the Chatham Convention?

6. Why did Brown refuse to abandon Harpers Ferry before militia forces and Federal troops arrived?

7. In the next to the last paragraph above, what does the sentence about haystacks and barns burning nightly refer to? What additional evidence can you cite to indicate that Brown’s raid was more widely supported than Virginia authorities indicated? [See Gov. Wise’s Proclamation, Document 2A.]
MAP OF HARPERS FERRY, #1

MAP OF HARPER'S FERRY, #2

Lesson One

**LOWER TOWN HARPERS FERRY**

1859 view of Lower Town Harpers Ferry and the covered Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Viaduct. The Point was a bustling commercial district at the time. This is one of the earliest known photographs of Harpers Ferry.
HARPERS FERRY INSURRECTION

Harpers Ferry Insurrection – Interior of the Engine-House, Just Before the Gate is Broken Down By the Storming Party – Col. Washington and His Associates As Captives, Held by Brown As Hostages.

The date was October 18, 1859.
LAST MEETING BETWEEN FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND JOHN BROWN

John Brown had first discussed his plan for invading Virginia with Frederick Douglass in 1847. In August 1859, the two met for the last time at a stone quarry in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, where Brown pleaded with his old friend to join him in the Harpers Ferry Raid. Douglass, however, was reluctant to join the enterprise and rejected his friend’s pleas.

While at my house, John Brown made the acquaintance [of a] Negro man who called himself by different names-sometimes “Emperor,” at other times, “Shields Green.” He was a fugitive slave, who had made his escape from Charleston, South Carolina; a State from which a slave found it no easy matter to run away. But Shields Green was not one to shrink from hardships or dangers. He was a man of few words, and his speech was singularly broken; but his courage and self-respect made him quite a dignified character. John Brown saw at once what “stuff” Green “was made of,” and confided to him his plans and purposes. Green easily believed in Brown, and promised to go with him whenever he should be ready to move.

About three weeks before the raid on Harpers Ferry, John Brown wrote to me, informing me that a beginning in his work would soon be made, and that before going forward he wanted to see me, and appointed an old stone-quarry near Chambersburg, Penn., as our place of meeting. Mr. Kag, his secretary would be there, and they wished me to bring any money I could command, and Shields Green along with me. In the same letter he said that his “mining tools” and stores were then at Chambersburg, and that he would be there to remove them.

I obeyed the old man’s summons. Taking Shields, we passed through New York City, where we called upon Rev. James Glocester and his wife, and told them where and for what we were going, and that our old friend needed money. Mrs. Glocester gave me ten dollars, and asked me to hand the same to John Brown, with her best wishes.

When I reached Chambersburg, a good deal of surprise was expressed (for I was instantly recognized) that I should come there unannounced, and I was pressed to make a speech to them, with which invitation I readily complied. Meanwhile, I called upon Mr. Henry Watson, a simple-minded and warm-hearted man, to whom Capt. Brown had imparted the secret of my visit, to show me the road to the appointed rendezvous. Watson was very busy in his barber’s shop, but he dropped all and put me on the right track. I approached the old quarry very cautiously, for John Brown was generally well armed, and regarded strangers with suspicion. He was then under the ban of the government, and heavy rewards were offered for his arrest, for offenses said to have been committed in Kansas. He was passing under the name of John Smith.

As I came near, he regarded me rather suspiciously, but soon recognized me, and received me cordially. He had in his hand when I met him a fishing-tackle, with which he had apparently been fishing in a stream hard [near] by; but I saw no fish, and did not sup-
pose that he cared much for his “fisherman’s luck.” The fishing was simply a disguise, and was certainly a good one. He looked every way like a man of the neighborhood, and as much at home as any of the farmers around there. His hat was old and storm-beaten, and his clothing was about the color of the stone quarry itself—his then present dwelling place.

His face wore an anxious expression, and he was much worn by thought and exposure. I felt that I was on a dangerous mission, and was as little desirous of discovery as himself, though no reward had been offered for me.

We—Mr. Kagi, Captain Brown, Shields Green, and myself—sat down among the rocks and talked over the enterprise which was about to be undertaken. The taking of Harpers Ferry, of which Captain Brown had merely hinted before, was now declared as his settled purpose, and he wanted to know what I thought of it. I at once opposed the measure with all the arguments at my command. To me such a measure would be fatal to running off slaves (as was the original plan), and fatal to all engaged in doing so. It would be an attack upon the Federal government, and would array the whole country against us.

Captain Brown did most of the talking on the other side of the question. He did not at all object to rousing the nation; it seemed to him that something startling was just what the nation needed. He had completely renounced his old plan, and thought that the capture of Harpers Ferry would serve as notice to the slaves that their friends had come, and as a trumpet to rally them to his standard. He described the place as to its means of defense, and how impossible it would be to dislodge him if once in possession.

Of course I was no match for him in such matters, but I told him, and these were my words, that all his arguments, and all his descriptions of the place, convinced me that he was going into a perfect steel-trap, and that once in he would never get out alive; that he would be surrounded at once and escape would be impossible. He was not to be shaken by anything I could say, but treated my views respectfully, replying that even if surrounded he would find means for cutting his way out; but that would not be forced upon him; he should, at the start, have a number of the best citizens of the neighborhood as his prisoners and that holding them as hostages he should be able, if worse came to worse, to dictate terms of egress from the town.

I looked at him with some astonishment, that he could rest upon a reed so weak and broken, and told him that Virginia would blow him and his hostages sky-high, rather than that he should hold Harpers Ferry an hour. Our talk was long and earnest; we spent the most of Saturday and a part of Sunday in this debate—Brown for Harpers Ferry, and I against it; he for striking a blow which should instantly rouse the country, and I for the policy of gradually and unaccountably drawing off the slaves to the mountains, as at first suggested and proposed by him.

When I found that he had fully made up his mind and could not be dissuaded, I turned to Shields Green and told him he heard what Captain Brown had said; his old plan was
changed, and that I should return home, and if he wished to go with me he could do so. Captain Brown urged us both to go with him, but I could not do so, and could but feel that he was about to rivet the fetters more firmly than ever on the limbs of the enslaved.

In parting he put his arms around me in a manner more than friendly, and said: “Come with me, Douglass; I will defend you with my life. I want you for a special purpose. When I strike, the bees will begin to swarm, and I shall want you to help hive them.” But my discretion or my cowardice made me proof against the dear old man’s eloquence — perhaps it was something of both which determined my course. When about to leave I asked Green what he had decided to do, and was surprised by his coolly saying, in his broken way, “I b’leve I’ll go wid de ole man.”

Here we separated; they to go to Harpers Ferry, I to Rochester. There has been some difference of opinion as to the propriety of my course in thus leaving my friend. Some have thought that I ought to have gone with him; but I have no reproaches for myself at this point, and since I have been assailed only by colored men who kept even farther from this brave and heroic man than I did, I shall not trouble myself much about their criticisms. They compliment me in assuming that I should perform greater deeds than themselves.

Such then was my connection with John Brown, and it may be asked, if this is all, why I should have objected to being sent to Virginia to be tried for the offense charged. The explanation is not difficult. I knew that if my enemies could not prove me guilty of the offense of being with John Brown, they could prove that I was Frederick Douglass; they could prove that I was in correspondence and conspiracy with Brown against slavery; they could prove that I brought Shields Green, one of the bravest of his soldiers, all the way from Rochester to him at Chambersburg; they could prove that I brought money to aid him, and in what was then the state of the public mind I could not hope to make a jury of Virginia believe I did not go the whole length he went, or that I was not one of his supporters; and I knew that all Virginia, were I once in her clutches, would say “Let him be hanged.”

Before I had left Canada for England, Jeremiah Anderson, one of Brown’s men, who was present and took part in the raid, but escaped by the mountains, joined me, and he told me that he and Shields Green were sent out on special duty as soon as the capture of the arsenal, etc., was effected. Their business was to bring in the slaves from the surrounding country, and hence they were on the outside when Brown was surrounded. I said, to him, “Why then did not Shields come with you?” “Well,” he said, “I told him to come; that we could do nothing more, but he simply said he must go down to de ole man.”

Anderson further told me that Captain Brown was careful to keep his plans from his men, and that there was much opposition among them when they found what were
the precise movements determined upon; but they were an oath-bound company, and like good soldiers were agreed to follow their captain wherever he might lead.


**Questions for Discussion:**

1. Why did Douglass refuse to join John Brown in the Harpers Ferry raid?

2. According to Douglass, how did Brown’s men initially react to his declared intention to seize the Federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry?

3. According to Douglass, how had Brown altered his original plan for going into Virginia?

4. How did Brown justify his decision to seize the Federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry? Why did Douglass oppose the plan?

5. How did Brown intend to insure his escape from Harpers Ferry?
Document Analysis Worksheet

1. Type of Document: (check one)
   - Journal
   - Letter
   - Speech
   - Telegram
   - Other (specify type)

2. Date of the Document: ____________________________

3. Author (or creator) of the document:

4. For what audience was the document written?

5. Document information:
   A. List important pieces of information presented in the document.

   ______________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________
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   B. Why was the document written?

   ______________________________________________________
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   ______________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________

Adapted from the Written Document Analysis Worksheet designed and developed by the Education Staff, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC 20408
### Notetaking Worksheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Point of view</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frederick Douglass</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jefferson Davis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abraham Lincoln</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Brown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franklin Sanborn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerritt Smith</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas Wentworth Higginson</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harriet Tubman</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Delaney</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel Gridley Howe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avis (Brown’s Jailer)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theodore Parker</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lesson One

DISCUSSION FORM

Refutation

Defense

Conclusion
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Questions?
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