

John Brown: The Shaping of Society

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Big Ideas: Decipher meaning and important historical events in various texts – and how these fit into the larger fabric of society.

Essential Questions: Why is John Brown a significant figure in West Virginia History? What specific events and struggles, that increasingly divided the nation by the 1850s, are linked to John Brown?

West Virginia Social Studies Standards

SS.5.WV.4 Sequence the events that led to the formation of the state of West Virginia (e.g., timeline).

SS.5.WV.6 Analyze the moral, ethical and legal tensions that led to the creation of the new state of West Virginia and how those tensions were resolved.

**Arts CSOs are listed below in the learning plan for their respective discipline.*

Learning Plan

During social studies/history time or in cooperation with the social studies/history teacher, students must have developed the content background knowledge related to John Brown. Students generally need to understand who John Brown was and the contributions he made to West Virginia. Specifically, the following knowledge would be helpful: attack at Harpers Ferry on October 16, 1859; timeline and events that led to the Civil War; slavery and the struggles that increasingly divided the nation by the 1850's; command of applicable vocabulary such as abolitionist/abolitionism, treason, traitor, oppression and secession.

Each/all of the activities below aim to use the Arts as a tool to deepen student understanding and connect them to the material in hands-on, experiential ways. If all arts activities are used, there are numerous ways to expand and revise the lessons to eliminate any redundancy.

Theater

TH.S.LI.2 Students will act by developing, communicating, and sustaining characters in improvisations and formal and informal productions.

As a class, read through, cast, and informally produce the play, [Ossawatomie Brown](#) (The Insurrection at Harper's Ferry). A Drama, in Three Acts. There is some strong language contained in the play, teachers might want to edit some parts of the text. After this informal production, divide the class into small discussion groups.

In each group, students will read through the play (or listen/watch the recording of the class performance if the teacher made an audio or video recording). Students will need their own copy of the play. (The entire transcript can be found in the link above.) Each small group will complete together the form "Script Analysis." On this sheet, they will record information (or highlight passages in the script) that support the 2 questions. Small groups will gather as a whole class to share and discuss their analysis.

Visual Arts

VA.S.5.4 Students will:

- identify how the visual arts have a history and specific relationship to culture;
- analyze works of art that reflect different styles and time periods; and
- demonstrate an understanding of how history, culture, and the arts influence each other.

Read [*The Life, Trial and Execution of John Brown*](#).

Each student will need their own copy (the entire transcript can be found in the link above). Each student will read this primary source document and take notes on how John Brown is described (his posture, appearance, height, facial features, how he carried himself as a businessman, farmer, etc.). It might be helpful if teachers read through this document (or choose specific passages) with the entire class first and/or highlight examples from the text (i.e.: What descriptive language is being used? What specific historical or cultural references are made to describe John Brown's appearance? What does this time period suggest about the appearance/description of those in power?).

Based on their personal notes, each student will now draw a portrait of what they think John Brown looked like. Each choice that is made should be supported by descriptions and historical information presented in the text. Students will also write a 1 paragraph response to accompany their portraits answering the question, "John Brown was important in the history of West Virginia becoming a state because" Students can share their drawings with the class and/or display them in school. Students can also search in the [West Virginia State Archives](#) for images of John

Brown and compare their renderings (based on the text) to photographs and images of the man.

Music

MU.S.GM3-5.4 Students will

- understand relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts
- understand music in relation to history and culture

Students will learn the music and lyrics to the [John Brown Song](#). Each student will need their own copy of the sheet music (the music can be found in the link above). After students have learned the music and lyrics, divide the class into small discussion groups.

In each group, students will read through each of the verses (or listen to a recording of the class/teacher singing the song if the teacher has made an audio or video recording). Each small group will answer together the following questions: 1) What specific evidence in the music can you find that suggests how John Brown felt about slavery (think about what moral, ethical, and/or legal tensions John Brown faced) and 2) Based on your reading of the verses, why do you think John Brown is a significant figure in West Virginia History? Back up your answer with specific analysis of the words contained in each verse (think about what these words mean and how they relate to the formation of the state of West Virginia). Each small group should record their answers (or highlight verses in the song) that support these questions. Small groups will gather as a whole class to share and discuss their analysis. It is encouraged that students also have the opportunity to informally perform and discuss their understanding of the music.

Dance

D.S.LI.7 Students will connect dance to other disciplines.

In small groups (3-5), students will either walk through the Museum together or look at on-line images, quotes and artifacts related to John Brown and/or that time period. Each group should choose at least 2 images, quotes, or artifacts that really “speak to them” about this period of history. For example, from the collections of the West Virginia State Museum:



Example #1: Noose allegedly used in John Brown hanging in Charles Town.

The 35th State

"Our fate and the fate of our national Union must be the same. We go together to prosperity, or we go down together in ruin."

—statehood leader Archibald Campbell

Example #2: Quote from statehood leader, "...We go together to prosperity, or we go down together in ruin."

In each small group, students will discuss their selected items. Each small group should consider together the following questions and record their answers: 1) What imagery or words come to mind as you read, examine or look at these items? and 2) How do these images connect with your understanding of how John Brown felt about slavery and why you think John Brown is a significant figure in West Virginia history?

Each group should then create a short movement study/dance based on the selected items, the images that they conjured up for the group and their understanding of how this relates to the historical, cultural significance of John Brown. It would be beneficial if the teacher had background knowledge in facilitating basic movement generation and if students have had previous opportunities to create movement to demonstrate understanding.

Small groups will gather as a whole class to perform their movement studies and share and discuss their analysis of the movement and its connections to the

chosen images. It is encouraged that students also have the opportunity to informally perform these movement studies and discuss the historical images and context.

Materials and Other Resources

Specific materials are detailed in the Arts content above.

WV Archives and History: [A Brief History of African Americans in West Virginia](#)

WV Archives and History: [Celebrating Lives: A Glimpse at African-Americans in West Virginia](#)

West Virginia [Music Hall of Fame](#)

West Virginia [Dance Company](#)

[Allied Artists of West Virginia](#)

Script Analysis

What specific evidence in the play can you find that suggests how John Brown felt about slavery? What moral, ethical, and/or legal tensions did John Brown face?

Brown. I know, my boy, I know. But I don't like the place. It's not a peaceful one. I see men's rights molested by a set of lawless ruffians. Sooner than suffer the innovations that some do, I'd rather death, war, anything but tyranny.

Brown. Don't fire boys, we will leave that till the last. They all may have wives or sisters, and I want not to shed a drop of innocent blood if I can help it.

Julia. [Looking out.] But who are these who threaten you so violently? These are no hired ruffians! Oh, tell me in heaven's name what have you done to arouse such hatred in them? What heavy crime committed?

Brown. Crime, girl! Look down upon those men, and in every face behold a slaveholder! The crime I have committed against those men is not the bloody deed with which they charge me, but worse, far worse, for I have told them to their teeth, that I hold not with their creed which teaches them to barter human souls.

Brown. [Reading letter.] It is well known, that in every instance where an enlightened body of men have espoused the cause of the oppressed, and have endeavored to set them free, the result has invariably proved a failure, from sole cause that the would-be liberators, depend on the

co-operation of those whose battles they are fighting, but which inevitably fails them at the moment of action. This is a painful conviction, but one that is forced upon every thinking mind by all past experience. It is a stubborn fact, recorded [sic] in the history of ages. To emancipate at one blow any down-trodden race, you must provide force enough to liberate them at least without co-operation from, if not absolutely against their will. In withholding education from the slaves, the men of the South have raised a barrier that is mightier than any force of arms that can be brought to bear against it, and it is called ignorance and fear. If, in spite of these arguments, you are still determined to rush on to the attack, I will give you all the pecuniary aid in my power, but remember, I have no faith in the success of the undertaking. A Philosopher.” [Speaking.] There’s a wet blanket, and from a professed abolitionist! [Derisively.] An old fox. A philosopher truly—but one of that school that fattens on the follies of men, and chuckles over his wisdom and his prudence. Well, friend, ha, ahem! [checking himself.] your money may do more for us than your sympathy, but I would not give much for either. What have we here? [opening another letter.] signed G. S.—ha, this is joining opposites if you will. Mark now from that stoic, this nervous, sympathetic nature that feels the wrongs of others as they were his own. [Reads.] “Is it natural when the body’s bent, to regain its upright posture? Is it natural, were one hand corded to our side, the other should be used to free it? Is it not a law divine, that when the bird escapes from bondage it soars to retain its freedom? Are we not therefore bound by strong ties of humanity, to burst the ties that bind the slaves to bondage, that they may soar to regain their level with the free men of the earth.” [Speaking.] Those may be the sentiments of a visionary enthusiast, but there’s more humanity in them, and I like him for it. Well, boy?

Cook. Much, that is satisfactory. I have been in many Northern towns since I was here, and in every place is the same sympathy evinced, the same assistance offered. When I come this way I am cautious, as you see, disguising myself in this way in order to ascertain the feeling that is manifested.

Brown. And you find the cause goes well?

Cook. The cause works gloriously. We have more sympathy than you would well believe. Every man who dares to speak his real thoughts, is ready for the struggle. All seem prepared, and once let the blow be struck, there is not one but goes with us, heart and hand.

Brown. And the sooner now that blow is struck, the better. [Rising.] This is no sudden movement. Men have worked for this with patient toil for years. It is a question that involves the whole social structure of the world—and what is this poor brain, and heart, and strength to give to such a cause? I have seen it could be done, and seen the means, and now the time is come—‘tis ripe—‘tis almost here—one effort and the day is ours.

Cook. God speed it, and make it a bloodless one.

Brown. And bloodless it shall be. For what else was time and caution needed? We are not here for purposes of blood and riot. He among us who would strike a blow, except in self-

defense, falls at once from a martyr and a hero, to grovel among the lowest felons of the earth. But I must leave you, for I have weighty business yet on hand.

Brown. Whatever is represented to the contrary, believe me, our sole object was to free the slaves, from motives of philanthropy. We look upon ourselves as workers in a great and good cause, to which we have sacrificed our lives. I would have wished it otherwise, but being so, we lay them down freely, and trust that the future will beam on more successful efforts.

Brown. I was unwilling to cause unnecessary suffering, and this is the result.

Brown. Tried—condemned—aye, and executed, if these fellows had their way. But not that yet. How easy it is for them to string a few light words together to sum up the aims and creation of a scheme like this, of which they know so little. Lost! It is not lost. True, our effort failed, and our lives must pay the forfeit, but the cause—the glorious cause—lives yet in the hearts of men who will follow in our footsteps.

Based on your reading of the play, why do you think John Brown is a significant figure in West Virginia History? Back up your answer with specific analysis of the play and discuss how these events relate to the formation of the state of West Virginia. (ie: non-violent means; committed to the cause of free men; etc)