Grades: Recommended for grades 8-12
Subject(s): Psychology, Social Studies, or English

Time Required: 4+ class periods
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Overview
Nearly every United States history textbook will emphasize the role of nineteenth-century abolitionist John Brown, who led an unsuccessful slave uprising against the federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, in 1859, and was convicted of treason and hanged. No historical character illustrates the rift in the country and the passion of individuals better than John Brown. In this lesson, students will develop an understanding of John Brown’s significance by analyzing characterizations of Brown and by examining the polarizing impact that he and his raid had on this nation in the years immediately prior to the outbreak of the Civil War.

Understanding Goal
Through examination of concepts such as bias, propaganda, demonization, and martyrdom, the student will achieve a higher understanding of the cultural environment and psychological mindset within American society during the period leading up to the Civil War.

Objectives
The student will:
- acquire a deeper understanding of historical bias,
- understand why John Brown’s actions and the reactions to him exemplified two sides of the greater conflict,
- assess the evidence in favor of John Brown as a hero and then in favor of him as a villain,
- engage in meaningful discussion regarding polarizing figures and events in history

Investigative Questions
What is the historical significance of John Brown’s actions, his justifications, and his legacy? How did the debate over slavery and its extension become magnified in John Brown and his actions? Why did many Americans chose sides with regard to his actions?

Materials
- Computer lab/Internet access/projection technology, if available
- John Brown journal questions (hand out, provide orally, or display on projector/board)
Tennessee State Curriculum Standards
High School Psychology

Social Studies Practices

SSP.01 Collect data and information from a variety of primary and secondary sources, including: printer materials, graphic representations, field observations/landscape analysis, artifacts, media and technology sources.

SSP.02 Critically examine a primary or secondary source in order to extract and paraphrase significant ideas, discern differences between evidence and assertion, draw inferences and conclusions, recognize author’s purposes, point of view, and potential bias, assess the strengths and limitations of arguments.

SSP.05 Develop historical awareness by recognizing how and why historical accounts change over time, perceiving and presenting past events and issues as they might have been experienced by the people of the time, with historical empathy rather than present-mindedness, evaluating how unique circumstances of time and place create context and contribute to action and reaction, identifying patterns of continuity and change over time, making connections to the present.

Research, Methods, Measurement, and Statistics

P.05 Identify ethical standards psychologists must follow regarding research with human participants.

Sensation and Perception

P.21 Explain how experiences and expectations influence perception.

Sociocultural Diversity

P.46 Explain how perspectives influence stereotypes and the treatment of minority and majority groups in society.

Standard 2.0: Economics

8th Grade Social Studies

8.68 Explain the motivations behind passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, and analyze the effects of the compromise, including the rise of the Republican party, “Bleeding Kansas,” Preston Brook’s attack on Charles Summer, John Brown’s raid at Harper’s Ferry.

English

11-12.W.RBPK.7 Conduct and write short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question or solve a problem by narrowing or broadening the inquiry when appropriate, synthesizing multiple sources on the subject, and demonstrating a new understanding of the subject under investigation.

Library of Congress Resources

- John Brown: an address by Frederick Douglass [see above]
- Address of John Brown . . . Sentence of Death, For his heroic attempt at Harpers Ferry . . . [Trial Speech]
- Correspondence between Lydia Maria Child and Gov. Wise and Mrs. Mason, of Virginia.

Other Resources

- Newspaper articles after Harper’s Ferry:
  - The Cloud in the Distance No Bigger then a Man’s Hand” - The First Battle of the "Irrepressible Conflict," Enquirer
  - “No Title” New York Tribune
  - “The Harper’s Ferry Riot” Republican Banner and Nashville Whig
  - The Execution of John Brown, Register, Raleigh, North Carolina

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Other Resources (continued from p. 2)

- “John Brown: History’s Greatest Hero” by: Eugene V. Debs
- Virginia Historical Society’s John Brown page
- Student Text referenced: Prentice Hall, United States History: Reconstruction to the Present (2008), Chapter 3 (pages 68 and 71 for specific information on John Brown)
- PBS overview—John Brown

Address of John Brown . . . Sentence of Death; For his heroic attempt at Harpers Ferry . . . [n.d]

PROCEDURE

PART 1 (1-3 class periods, depending on choices)
⇒ Social Studies teachers may introduce John Brown during the unit on Civil War and Reconstruction. Possible procedural steps:

A. Read section in history textbook on John Brown and/or create a short introductory PowerPoint for students. Specifically highlighted in introductory lesson will be John Brown’s role at Pottawatomie Creek and Harper’s Ferry. Psychology or English III instructors may use any format to introduce him as a historical figure. Check out PBS for a good overview.

B. It would also be beneficial for students (especially for middle school students) to define certain words during Part 1 of the lesson. Such a list might include bias, propaganda, demonization, martyrdom, vitriol, arsenal, rebellion, uprising, polarize, objective, subjective, extremist, terrorism, historical significance, incite, insanity plea, treason, emancipation, abolition, insurrection, primary source, secondary source…

C. As a prerequisite, John Brown’s activities and impact may also be plotted on a student-created timeline listing significant events leading to war.

D. Point out to students that Brown’s historical role was magnified by the animosities of the period and that his actions caused tremendous reaction in the country because of the background of hostility over the issue of slavery and the question of its extension to the west. In order to illustrate this, use the PBS overview of John Brown. Have students analyze the first sentence, “John Brown was a man of action -- a man who would not be deterred from his mission of abolishing slavery.” How does this “mission” make him so important to the history of this time period? What kind of mood is the author setting by using this phrase to begin the summary of John Brown’s life? Is this a positive or negative way to begin the Web page, or is it a neutral statement? Why?
**Procedure (cont.)**

**PART 2** (1 class period): Read John Brown’s trial speech to students or pass it out and have them read and discuss it in groups. After initial examination of the speech, have students complete a journal entry (questions listed below) regarding their first impressions of Brown.

**Journal Questions:**
1. In your current opinion, was John Brown a hero or a villain (or both)? Explain your answer and be prepared to defend it.
2. What did you think about his trial speech? Was it persuasive of his innocence? Do you believe what he said? Why or why not? Or, what parts did you believe or disbelieve?
3. What phrases were meant to evoke emotion (sadness, anger, guilt, pity, hatred, empathy, etc.)?
4. Are his actions justified in any way? Explain.
5. Did the punishment fit the crime? Why or why not?
6. Would John Brown’s actions have been as newsworthy or as historically significant if they had taken place in any other American time period? Explain your answer.

**PART 3** (1-2 class periods): In four to six small groups or pairs, students examine a source listed below for biased language or descriptions. Each group will make a simple chart of words or phrases pulled for their positive slant (words such as martyr, holy, defender) as well as expressions that are more negative in nature (words such as terrorist, murderer, villain). Students may find some of the sources neutral overall, but slightly leaning towards one perspective or another. Sources used include primary sources from before the war in newspaper articles and in correspondence, as well as later sources from former abolitionist Frederick Douglass and labor leader Eugene Debs. Remind students to consider where and when the sources were written. After groups or pairs examine their sources, have them share both the overall slant of the author (positive, negative, neutral) and their individual lists to make one large master list. Teachers may then regroup the class so that students can share source information with members from other groups.

Sources to use:
- Newspapers: *Enquirer, New York Tribune, Republican Banner and Nashville Whig*, and *Register*
- *Lydia Maria Child letters, 1859* (Click [here](#) for a short biography of Child.)
- *Frederick Douglass’s View in 1881, an address from Storer College*
- *From Eugene Debs in 1907* (Click [here](#) for more information on Eugene Debs.)

**PART 4** (1 class period): Revisiting Frederick Douglass
For a confirmation of student ability to discern bias, revisit Frederick Douglass’s address at Storer College. Have students answer the following questions and then engage them in discussion of the answers.

Questions:
1. What phrase on page 7 points to Frederick Douglass’s personal goal of remaining unbiased in his examination of John Brown and the raid at Harper’s Ferry?
2. Can you find any positive or negative descriptions of John Brown or his actions in this source? If so, please list as many examples as you can find.
3. After reading Frederick Douglass’s address, do you believe that he chooses sides? In other words, does he seem more inclined to believe that John Brown was justified in his crime or not? How do you know? Show evidence.
**Procedure (cont.)**

In open discussion, encourage students to share their answers and opinions. Did the primary sources offered over the course of this lesson alter their perceptions of what happened? Does it matter that the Lydia Maria Child letters were written in 1859 and that Frederick Douglass had plenty of hindsight when he gave his speech in 1881?

Ask students to create Venn Diagrams using their journal answers and group discussion ideas. On one side of the diagram, they should list their initial ideas and thoughts about Brown. On the other side, they could list their new knowledge and new perceptions of his actions. In the middle, they would list any thoughts that are concurrent.

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**Extension**

Students may examine pictorial evidence from the Library of Congress Web site or an example of propaganda, such as a popular song written about John Brown. What would be the impact today of visual and musical references to his raid on Harper’s Ferry? What if television or radio were involved—what would the outcomes be? What if one of today’s most beloved celebrities backed John Brown or defied him openly?

Links for possible resources:
- [John Brown Song](#)
- [John Brown, exhibiting his hangmen](#)
- [John Brown Song](#)
- [John Brown](#)
- [Harper’s Ferry insurrection- Interior of the Engine-House...](#)
- [Trial of Ossawattamie...](#)
- [Harper's Ferry insurrection - the battle ground...](#)

A concept attainment or vocabulary game may be completed using inflammatory comments and important words such as: bias, propaganda, demonization, martyrdom, vitriol, arsenal, rebellion, uprising, polarize, objective, subjective, extremist, terrorism, historical significance, incite, insanity plea, treason, emancipation, abolition, insurrection, primary source, secondary source. Definition and examples of concept attainments at [http://www.ascd.org/ascd-express/vol4/420-silver.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/ascd-express/vol4/420-silver.aspx).

Students may write a short essay explaining the significance of another polarizing figure in American history, comparing and contrasting this person to John Brown.

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**Evaluation**

The students will be evaluated on the class participation in the group activity and discussions as well as journal entries and Venn diagrams.