

# Interpreting John Brown: Infusing Historical Thinking into Classroom Instruction

**Author:** Bruce A. Lesh

**Duration:** 90 minutes

## Objectives:

- Identify the facts surrounding John Brown's role in Antebellum America
- Compare and contrast various historical interpretations of John Brown
- Construct an historical argument regarding how John Brown should be memorialized

## Procedures:

1. Initiate the lesson, by asking students why we would commemorate an historical event with a marker, sign, statue, or plaque. Display examples from your neighborhood, state, or region. Discuss why certain people or events might merit commemoration over others.
2. Display the visual depictions of John Brown and lead students through an evaluation of the messages conveyed by the sources. Further the examination of John Brown, by asking the following questions:
  - a. Why would artists produce two dramatically different interpretations of John Brown?  
*Answers should mention that pieces could have been created during different time periods, the artists may have a bias or point they wanted to make, or it could represent a particular historical interpretation.*
  - b. What contradiction regarding democracy and freedom might John Brown's actions symbolize?  
*Brown's actions bring to the forefront the fact that the United States was formed to protect freedom and yet harbored within its borders an institution that was designed to restrict freedom.*
  - c. Should John Brown be considered an American hero?  
*Student answers will vary depending upon their feelings regarding the rule of law, morality, and the use of violence as a political tool.*

3. Review the beliefs and actions taken by John Brown by discussing the homework found on **Resource Sheet 1**. Introduce students to the basics of John Brown and his actions in Kansas, Missouri, and Virginia. Consult information found at the following websites to reinforce the review of the homework:

- <http://www.wvculture.org/History/jnobrown.html>
- <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2940.html>
- <http://www.civilwarhome.com/johnbrown.htm>
- <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/johnbrown/brownaccount.html>
- [http://www.historynow.org/09\\_2005/historian6.html](http://www.historynow.org/09_2005/historian6.html)

Be sure to emphasize Brown's religious beliefs, his role in "Bleeding Kansas," his raid into Missouri, and the Harper's Ferry Raid. Discuss with students the various sectional reactions to Brown's failed raid. Inform students that it is their task to determine how John Brown should be memorialized historically.

4. Provide each student with a copy of **Resource Sheet 4** and one of the primary or secondary sources from **Resource Sheet 3A-3L**. Select six of the sources so that group size remain manageable. Ask students to read their source and answer the questions on **Resource Sheet 4**. Remind students that they are reading to determine the type of person that Nat Turner was described to be by the author.
5. Have students reorganize themselves into groups of six and share what they found in their respective sources. Students should record the information that is shared on their worksheet.
6. Come back together as a full class and share the information that was gleaned from the documents and from discussion. As students share their findings record the information on the board or the overhead.

Further the classes understanding of John Brown by asking:

- Why would the author's interpretations of John Brown differ so much?
- Why would the author's interpretations of John Brown be similar?
- How can we develop an interpretation of John Brown?

5. Return to some of the images displayed at the outset of the lesson. Ask the students which picture they feel best represents the accurate historical John Brown. Prompt students to defend their choices with information gleaned from documents and discussion. Focus students back on the question of whether or not John Brown should be considered a hero. Ask:

- What do we know about the sources of information and how that might impact the interpretation we develop?

6. Discuss how the background of the sources' authors might impact our interpretation. Discuss the interpretive nature of history and how authorship of documents impacts the interpretations of past events, people, or ideas.

**Assessment:**

Assess students' understanding of the lesson, distribute **Resource Sheet 6** and instruct students to complete the activity.

## John Brown: Martyr, Hero, Villain, or Maniac?

**Read the following summary of the life of John Brown. At the conclusion of the reading, list Brown's beliefs and the actions he took based on these beliefs. Be prepared to discuss John Brown's role in the 1850s tomorrow in class.**

John Brown was born at Torrington, Conn., on May 4, 1800, to Owen Brown, a tanner, and Ruth Mills Brown, whose family had a history of mental instability. A devoutly religious youth, Brown studied briefly for the ministry but quit to learn the tanner's trade. He married Dianthe Lusk in 1820, who bore him 7 children (two mentally deficient) before her death in 1832; a year later he married Mary Ann Day, who bore 13 children in the next 21 years. During his first fifty years, Brown moved around the country, settling in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and New York, taking along his ever-growing family (he would father twenty children). Working at various times as a farmer, wool merchant, tanner, and land speculator, he was never financially successful. He was stubborn, possessed a notoriously poor sense of business, and had more than his share of bad luck. In the Panic of 1837, Brown -- like thousands of others -- would lose everything. In 1842, he filed for bankruptcy.

Despite his financial setbacks, Brown always found a way to support the abolitionist cause. He said later that he had realized the sin of slavery, "the sum of all villainies," at 12, and that seeing an African American boy mistreated had "led him to declare, or *swear*: eternal war with slavery." He also developed a great interest in military history, especially in the guerrilla warfare of the Napoleonic Wars and in the Haitian slave rebellion. According to family testimony, he finally concluded that slavery could be destroyed only by atonement in blood, deciding in 1839 that the South, "Africa itself," should be invaded and the slaves freed at gunpoint. He participated in the Underground Railroad and, in 1851, helped establish the League of Gileadites, an organization that worked to protect escaped slaves from slave catchers.

In 1847 famous abolitionist and escaped former slave Frederick Douglass met Brown for the first time in Springfield, Massachusetts. Of the meeting, Douglass stated that, "though a white gentleman, [Brown] is in sympathy a black man, and as deeply interested in our cause, as though his own soul had been pierced with the iron of slavery." It was at this meeting that Brown first outlined to Douglass his plan to lead a war to free slaves. Brown moved to the black community of North Elba, New York, in 1849. Gerrit Smith, a wealthy abolitionist, had donated 120,000 acres of his property in the Adirondacks to black families who were willing to clear and farm the land. Brown, knowing that many of the families were finding life in this isolated area difficult, offered to establish his own home there and teach his neighbors how to farm the rocky soil. "He is socializing and associating with Blacks in this community," comments historian, James Horton. "This is something unheard of for a white man to be doing in the middle of the 19th century. Most abolitionists were lukewarm, at best, on the notion of racial equality. John Brown in this regard was, I think, remarkable."

Despite his contributions to the antislavery cause, Brown did not emerge as a figure of major significance until 1855, after he followed five of his sons to the Kansas territory. Proslavery forces had terrorized the region, using threats and violence to influence elections in an attempt to make Kansas a slave state. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 dictated that the people of the territories would vote on whether to be free or slave. On May 24, 1856, in retribution for an attack on the free-soil town of Lawrence, Brown led a small party of men to the homes of proslavery settlers along Pottawatomie Creek. Five men were dragged from their homes and brutally killed. Brown would say that he approved of, but did not participate in, the killings. Brown took to the brush, striking out against proslavery forces whenever possible.

For the next two and a half years, Brown traveled ceaselessly throughout New England beseeching abolitionists for money and guns to bring his war against slavery to the South. A clandestine group of wealthy abolitionists, known as the "Secret Six," funded Brown, allowing him to raise a small army. Brown spent the summer of 1856 collecting money for Kansas in New England, where prominent public figures, some not wholly aware of the details of his Kansas activities, were impressed by his dedication to the abolitionist cause. The Massachusetts Kansas Committee, whose directors included such civic leaders as Theodore Parker, Samuel Gridley Howe, and Thomas W. Higginson, helped him to gather recruits, guns, and money. In August he led a skirmish at Osawatimie in which his son Frederick was killed. "I will die fighting for this cause," Brown wrote. "There will be no peace in this land until slavery is done for."

He went East in early 1857 with plans for a Southern invasion apparently in hand, ordered a thousand 6-foot pikes from a Connecticut firm, and in late summer gathered a band of recruits at Tabor, Iowa, for training. He held frequent conferences with Eastern abolitionists and in early 1858 sent John Junior to survey the country

around Harpers Ferry, Va., the site of a Federal arsenal. In April he held a curious 10-day meeting of sympathizers in Chatham, Ontario, Canada, during which he explained his plan to invade the South, arm the slaves, and set up a free state under a new constitution; the meeting adopted his plan and then voted him commander in chief. He returned to Kansas under the name of Shubel Morgan to lead a raid into Missouri, killing one man and taking some slaves back to Canada.

Together with his supporters, Brown drafted his utopian "Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the People of the United States," a document intended to reform the existing flawed proslavery Constitution in what Brown hoped would be a better society built on the concept of racial equality. Brown presented his constitution to an antislavery convention of African-Americans in Chatham, Ontario in May 1858. The convention approved the constitution and elected several blacks to official positions in the provisional government. The convention itself was extraordinary. As historian David Reynolds noted, "It was organized by a white man, attended largely by blacks, and designed to raise a black army to trigger an African American revolution that would wipe out slavery."

In early 1859 he again toured the East to raise money, and in July he rented a farm 5 miles north of Harpers Ferry, where he recruited 21 men (16 white and 5 black) for final training. He intended to seize the arsenal, distribute arms to the slaves he thought would rally to him, and set up a free state for African Americans within the South. Though Harpers Ferry was an isolated mountain town, with few slaves in the vicinity, the irrationality of his plan seemed to occur to no one.

On the night of Oct. 16, 1859, Brown set out for Harpers Ferry with 18 men and a wagonload of supplies, leaving 3 men behind to guard the farm. After cutting the telegraph wires, Brown's party slipped into the town and easily captured the armory watchmen. Inexplicably, Brown allowed the midnight train to go through; the conductor telegraphed an alarm the next morning. Shooting broke out early on the 17th between Brown's men and local residents, while militia soon arrived from Charles Town. By nightfall Brown's band lay trapped in the armory engine house, all but 5 wounded, Brown's sons Oliver and Watson fatally. That night Col. Robert E. Lee and Lt. J. E. B. Stuart, commanding 90 marines, arrived from Washington. The next morning the marines stormed the engine house, bayoneting 2 men and slashing Brown severely with sabers. Of Brown's original party 10 died and 7 were captured; on the other side the toll was a marine and 4 civilians, one of them, ironically, a free African American killed by mistake.

Brown was jailed at Charles Town and tried a week later, lying wounded on a stretcher, in a fair trial which some, however, felt to be unduly hasty. He put up no defense. "I believe that to have interfered as I have done," he said, "in behalf of His despised poor, I did no wrong, but right.... I am ready for my fate." The jury indicted him on three counts--treason against Virginia, conspiracy with African Americans, and first-degree murder. The court imposed the death sentence on November 2, to be executed a month later.

Brown was hanged at Charles Town on Dec. 2, 1859, with four of his men, after handing a prophetic note to his jailer on his way to the gallows: "I John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of *this guilty land*: will never be purged *away*; but with Blood."

**From: *Encyclopedia of World Biography on John Brown*, at: <http://www.bookrags.com/biography/john-brown/>; *The Trial of John Brown: A Commentary*, by Douglas O. Linder, at:**

**<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/johnbrown/brownaccount.html>;**

**John Brown's Beliefs**

**John Brown's Actions**

## John Brown: Maniac, Martyr, Insane...

Read the following quote and identify the author's thesis regarding John Brown and list one quote that provides support for the author's thesis.

"The picturesque figure which has been presented to the public as John Brown is an historical myth—a fiction.

His attempt at revolution was not the result of a previous conviction and consecration to duty and to the cause of humanity, but of a growth—the indulgence and development of an abnormal passion for speculation: the culmination downward of his speculative and criminal instinct.

John Brown will live in history; but his name will not be found among the names of those who have wrought for humanity and for righteousness; or among the names of martyrs and the saints who "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

"YET SHALL HE LIVE": but it will be as a soldier of fortune, an adventurer. He will take his place in history as such; and will rank among adventurers as Napoleon ranks among marshals; as Captain Kidd among pirates; and as Jonathan Wild among thieves."

Hill Peebles Wilson. *John Brown Soldier of Fortune: A Critique John Brown and the Legend of Fifty-Six*, 1913.

**Author's Thesis:**

**Quote to support the author's argument:**

## John Brown: Maniac, Martyr, Insane...

**Read the following quote and identify the author's thesis regarding John Brown and list one quote that provides support for the author's thesis.**

"On the 9<sup>th</sup> of May, 1800, at Torrington, Connecticut, was born a man who lived for two generations, but accomplished the work of two centuries. That man was John Brown, who ranks among the world's greatest heroes...He was not in sympathy with any of the parties, political or anti-slavery. All were too conservative to suit him. So, as a political orphan he went into Kansas, organized and led a new party that swore eternal death to slavery....He denounced slavery as a curse of the ages; affirmed the manhood of the slave...said he could see no use in talking. "Talk is a national institution; but it does no good for the slave." He thought it an excuse very well adapted for weak men with tender consciences. Most men who were afraid to fight, and too honest to be silent...the slaves, in his eyes, were prisoners of war; their tyrants, as he held, had taken up the sword, and must perish by it. This was his view of the great question of slavery..."

John Brown is rapidly settling down to his proper place in history, and the "madman" has been transformed into a "saint." When Brown struck his first blow for freedom, at the head of his little band of liberators, it was almost the universal judgment of both Americans and foreigners that he was a fanatic...John Brown said to a personal friend during his stay in Kansas: "Young men must learn to wait. Patience is the hardest lesson to learn. I have waited for twenty years to accomplish my purpose." Those are not the words of a mere visionary idealist, but the mature language of a practical and judicious leader, a leader than whom the world has never seen greater. By greatness is meant deep convictions of duty, a sense of the Infinite... to which the appeals of the innocent and helpless are more potential than the voices of angry thunder or destructive artillery. Such a man was John Brown. He was strong in his moral and mental nature, as well as in his physical nature. He was born to lead; and he led...Galileo, Copernicus, Newton, and John Brown have to wait the calmer judgments of future generations. These men believed that God sent them to do a certain work—to reveal a hidden truth; to pour light into the minds of benighted and superstitious men. They completed their work; they did nobly and well, and then bowed to rest...."

**The chapter from George Washington Williams, *History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1880*, titled "John Brown—Hero and Martyr." (1881)**

**Author's Thesis:**

**Quote to support the author's argument:**

## John Brown: Maniac, Martyr, Insane...

Read the following quote and identify the author's thesis regarding John Brown and list one quote that provides support for the author's thesis.

"Of Pilgrim pedigree and revolutionary fighting stock, our grim hero was one of those stern-faced sons of righteousness who read their Bible, rear great families of sons and daughters, and fight poverty's privations handicapped, with every chance of worldly success against them. John Brown's very name, rugged and familiar on the tongue, claims kin for him with a host of common people of English blood. Failing in one means of livelihood after another, he settled with his family on a farm among the lonely Adirondacks.

Insanity ran in Brown's family, and one of his sons in Kansas was a victim of malady. Yet monomaniacs may plot most cunningly; their folly develops more properly at the stage of action. What moonlight madness do we see in that constitution drawn up and read to confederates over the Canadian border, wherein John Brown announces the provisional government of the United States which he intends, as the new Cromwell, to establish.

John Brown was no Caesar, no Cromwell, but a plain citizen of a free republic, whom distressing events drove into a fanaticism to execute purposes to which he was incompetent. He detested slavery, and that detestation led him to take up arms not only against slavery, but against that public opinion which was slowly formulating how best to eradicate it. Woe to the conquered. The North made no appeals for that clemency which slaveholders had alone to consider. Brown had not been lenient to masters, nor were masters bound to be lenient to him."

James Schouler, *History of the United States of America under the Constitution*, 1891

**Author's Thesis:**

**Quote to support the author's argument:**



## John Brown: Maniac, Martyr, Insane...

Read the following quote and identify the author's thesis regarding John Brown and list one quote that provides support for the author's thesis.

“Now, fifty years later, it is possible to take an unbiased view of John Brown and his achievements, even if opinions as to his true character and moral worth diverge almost as violently as in 1859. There are those in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, appointed to teach history in high places, who are so blind as to see in John Brown only the murderer of the Pottawatomie, a “horse-thief and midnight assassin.” Still others behold him not merely a sainted martyr of the most elevated character, but the liberator of Kansas, and the man who, unaided, struck their chains from the limbs of more than three million human beings.

Something compelled him to attack slavery by force of arms, and to that impulse he yielded, reckoning not at all as to the outcome, and making not the slightest effort to plan beyond the first blow. Without foresight, strategy or generalship, he entered the Harper's Ferry trap confident that all was for the best, to be marvelously preserved from the saber which, had it gone home, must have rendered barren his entire life, his sacrifice and his devotion.

Oswald Garrison Villard. *John Brown, 1800-1859: A Biography Fifty Years After*, 1910.

**Author's Thesis:**

**Quote to support the author's argument:**

## John Brown: Maniac, Martyr, Insane...

Read the following quote and identify the author's thesis regarding John Brown and list one quote that provides support for the author's thesis.

“Out of the swirling phantasms of the Kansas war came tightlipped John Brown, with Blood on his hands and a Bible under his arm. This extraordinary desperado was religious to the point of mania. Before his killings he read chapters of Holy Writ to his family in a loud, sonorous voice. Religion, indomitable courage, cruelty and blood lust mingled in his personality with a saintly mildness of manner and dignified courtesy of speech.

Among his desires was the love of dramatic situations. He belonged to a strange race of men and women who are willing to do anything or suffer any torment if they may appear for a while in a conspicuous role. His design was to invade Virginia with a small determined group of men, seize the United States arsenal at Harpers Ferry, and call upon the slaves to rise in revolt...With his army of Negroes he intended to establish a military stronghold—or an independent Negro Republic in the Appalachian mountains. The scheme was insanely impracticable, so far away from every notion of reality...

...Brown was found guilty on all counts [treason, murder, and conspiring with slaves to rebel], and was hanged. Many people, in all parts of the country, thought he was insane, and he may have been, even if there is no evidence of insanity in his cool, coherent statements in court or in the large number of letters that he wrote friends and relatives while he was in jail.

So died old John Brown and his death thundered and reverberated through the American nation. The abolitionists now had a martyr...Southerners, almost to a man, believed the entire North was behind John Brown...”

W.E. Woodward. *A New American History*, 1936.

**Author's Thesis:**

**Quote to support the author's argument:**

## John Brown: Maniac, Martyr, Insane...

Read the following quote and identify the author's thesis regarding John Brown and list one quote that provides support for the author's thesis.

"It would be a gross distortion, however, to dismiss John Brown as a frontier horse thief. He was much too passionately and fanatically in earnest about his war on slavery to permit of any such oversimplification. His utter fearlessness, courage, and devotion to the cause were greatly admired by respectable antislavery men who saw in the old Puritan an ideal revolutionary leader...It seems best to deal with the insanity question promptly, for it is likely to confuse the issue and cause us to miss the meaning of Harper's Ferry. In dealing with the problem it is important not to blink, as many of his biographers have done, at the evidence of John Brown's close association with insanity in both his hereditary and his environment...What seems sane to some people at some times seems insane to other people at other times. In our own times we have witnessed what we consider psychopathic personalities rise to power over millions of people and plunge the world into war. Yet to the millions who followed them these leaders appeared sublime in their wisdom....The prestige and character of the men who lent John Brown Active [The Secret Six], is sometimes secret, support likewise suggest caution in dismissing Harper's Ferry as merely the work of a madman....The Crisis of Harper's Ferry was a crisis of means, not of ends. John Brown did not raise the question of whether slavery should be abolished or tolerated. That question had been raised in scores of ways and debated for a generation. Millions held strong convictions on the subject. Upon abolition, as an end, there was no difference between John Brown and the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society. But as a means of attaining abolition, there was much difference between them..."

C. Vann Woodward, "John Brown's Private War." 1952.

**Author's Thesis:**

**Quote to support the author's argument:**

## John Brown: Maniac, Martyr, Insane...

Read the following quote and identify the author's thesis regarding John Brown and list one quote that provides support for the author's thesis.

"We need allies who are going to help us achieve victory, not allies who are going to tell us to be nonviolent. If a white man wants to be your ally, what does he think of John Brown? You know what John Brown did? He went to war. He was a white man who went to war against white people to help free the slaves. ...White people call John Brown a nut. Go read the history, go read what all of them say about John Brown. They're trying to make it look like he was a nut, a fanatic. They made a movie on it; I saw a movie on the screen one night. But they depict him in this image because he was willing to shed blood to free slaves. And any white man who is ready and willing to shed blood for your freedom—in the sight of other whites, he's nuts...So, when you want to know good white folks in history where black people are concerned, go read the history of John Brown. Why, I would be afraid to get near John Brown if I go by what other white folks say about him. If we want some white allies, we need the kind John Brown was, or we don't need any."

Malcolm X, *Speech at the second rally of the Organization for Afro-American Unity, July 5, 1964 (By Any Means Necessary, Pathfinder Press, 1970, p.81)*, from: <http://socialismandliberation.org/mag/index.php?aid=483>

**Author's Thesis:**

**Quote to support the author's argument:**

## John Brown: Maniac, Martyr, Insane...

Read the following quote and identify the author's thesis regarding John Brown and list one quote that provides support for the author's thesis.

“John Brown never read the Communist Manifesto and knew little of the rise of Socialism. But he did realize that a suppressed and exploited part of the laboring classes in America—the Negroes—had been deprived by capitalists and land monopolists of the freedom to earn a living and to direct their lives which was vital in John Brown’s mind to a human being. He espoused therefore the freedom of the slave knowing well that freedom alone was not the settlement of the Negro problem; that it must be followed by education, the right to vote, and treatment as human beings. But all this he assumed was inherent in the American system and would follow the freedom of the slaves... he left a clear legacy: First, the right of the enslaved to repel oppression...He believed in the abilities and worth of the souls of black folk. He believed in the gifts that they would be able to furnish and he regarded them as equals to all Americans of any color. He believed that men should labor for what they earned and should not get their income by chance or inheritance. He believed in the freedom of the land and its fruits to be distributed in accord with the labor which was put upon it. Thus he was a pioneer in the fight for human equality and the uplift of the masses of men.”

W.E.B. Du Bois. *John Brown*, 1962.

**Author's Thesis:**

**Quote to support the author's argument:**

## John Brown: Maniac, Martyr, Insane...

Read the following quote and identify the author's thesis regarding John Brown and list one quote that provides support for the author's thesis.

"I hope that these pages convey some sense of him [John Brown] as a living man, a complex, polygonal man who defies easy categorization. He could be dictatorial and self-righteous, with an imperious manner that made him intolerant and unappreciative of others...He could become obsessed with a single idea...and pursue his current project with unswerving zeal....

...Yes, Brown smoldered over the manifold evils of slavery. He hated that "hellish" institution because it was cruelly unjust to Negroes, because it violated God's Commandments and made a mockery of the Declaration of Independence, because it menaced the nuclear family...We will never comprehend what Brown was about unless we take his religious views seriously. From "earliest childhood" he had learned to oppose slavery and to fear an all-wise, just, and all-powerful God, a God who demanded the most exacting obedience from the frail wretched sinners He placed on trial in this world... Brown was a devout Calvinist....However difficult it is for people in our secular age to accept Brown's religious notions, he nevertheless thought himself an instrument in the hands of God....

...Many students of history...have labeled Brown a religious maniac, ignoring the fact that Abraham Lincoln and Robert E. Lee—to name only two other figures of this extremely religious time—also came to regard themselves as instruments of God...Though often maligned as a demented dreamer, Brown on one respect was an extremely insightful man: he perceived the depth of southern anxieties about slavery, perceived all he had to do--- being a northern and an abolitionists—was to step into Dixie with a gun, announce that he was there to free the blacks, and the effect on the South would be cataclysmic...

...his solution to slavery may offend many of you. As for myself, I am not a violent man but I can appreciate why he could hate a hateful thing like slavery—and why he could think it too imbedded in America ever to be dislodged except by violence."

Stephen Oates. *To Purge This Land With Blood: A Biography of John Brown*. (1984)

**Author's Thesis:**

**Quote to support the author's argument:**

## John Brown: Maniac, Martyr, Insane...

Read the following quote and identify the author's thesis regarding John Brown and list one quote that provides support for the author's thesis.

"I think the reason white people think he was mad is because he was a white man and he was willing to sacrifice his life in order to liberate Black Americans. I think it's as simple as that. Black people don't think he's crazy, generally -- very few African Americans regard Brown as insane. If you go out onto the street today, whether you are speaking to a school kid or an elderly woman or a college professor, if it's an African American person you're talking to about John Brown, they are going start right out with the assumption that he was a hero because he was willing to sacrifice his life -- a white man -- in order to liberate Black Americans. If you speak to a white American, probably the same proportion of them will say he was a madman. And it's for the same reason, because he was a white man who was willing to sacrifice his life to liberate Black Americans. The very thing that makes him seem mad to white Americans is what makes him seem heroic to Black Americans. And that paradox, to me, goes to the heart of the racial divide in American culture. He stands astride in the most fascinating and revealing way, I think. The two largest racially definable segments of our population view the same figure, the same set of facts, with completely opposing points of view.

I think he's so important today for a gathering of reasons. Certainly because he is so revealing to any one of us willing to look at our ongoing racial divide, [and] the opposing ways in which he is regarded by white and American and Black Americans. But, he also, in his life, raises very basic and ongoing questions about political violence which we live with, deal with and puzzle over and are tormented by today -- violence in the service of an ideal, of a principled cause. This is a part of our lives today in so many ways. Whether it's an abortion clinic in upstate New York or a federal building in Oklahoma City, it's something that we deal with, we have to face and encounter and not try to understand and contextualize it somehow."

Russell Banks, historian

**Author's Thesis:**

**Quote to support the author's argument:**

## John Brown: Maniac, Martyr, Insane...

Read the following quote and identify the author's thesis regarding John Brown and list one quote that provides support for the author's thesis.

“...John Brown was not insane; instead he was a deeply religious, flawed, yet ultimately noble reformer; the Pottawatomie affair was indeed a crime, but it was what today would be called a war crime committed against proslavery settlers by a man who saw slavery itself as an unprovoked war of one race against another; and neither Brown's provisional constitution nor the Harper's Ferry raid were wild-eyed, erratic schemes doomed to failure; instead, they reflected Brown's overconfidence in whites' ability to rise above racism and in blacks' willingness to rise up in armed insurrection against their masters....John Brown emerges...not as an isolated, insane antislavery terrorist but as an amalgam of social currents—religious, reformist, racial, and political---that found explosive realization in him...”

David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights*.  
(2006)

Author's Thesis:

Quote to support the author's argument:



## John Brown: Maniac, Martyr, Insane...

**Read the following quote and identify the author's thesis regarding John Brown and list one quote that provides support for the author's thesis.**

"A deeply religious man and father of a large family, he believed that slavery was not going to relent in the face of political compromise or moral outcries from abolitionists....Brown...put black liberation first and foremost—not only as a political belief but as a personal ambition. As black people have long realized, their famous ally is considered fanatical and insane largely because he presumed their humanity in a society North and South that categorically dehumanized them. White Americans have long glorified violence and fanaticism when it pertained to their nationalistic interests...

...Brown is misunderstood by modern scholars and writers...because of his strong religious beliefs. However different their political and social views, even his nineteenth-century opponents had a better understanding of religion than do many biographers and scholars today. That he considered himself 'an instrument of Providence' smacks of delusion and fanaticism in modern and postmodern perceptions. That he likewise believed that all of the Christian scriptures reflect the same God at work in the history of redemption is likewise indigestible to most people in a post-Christian society.... Brown was a man of faith, and well read in the Bible and Christian literature. Like many Christians, he was converted as a youth, and he grew up in a theologically conservative, evangelical, and Calvinist home....Even after he committed himself full time to the abolitionist struggle, he reminded a church attendee, and faithful Bible student. Furthermore, he and his family represented a unique strand of the abolitionist movement. A devotedly Christian people who believed the Bible to be the inspired and infallible word of God, they were also Biblical egalitarians—racial dissenters from the racist beliefs of many white Christians. The Browns applied the biblical doctrine of humanity the image of God to the frontier as well as the slave market, and were thus righteously indignant at the social, political, and ecclesiastical realities of society steeped in white supremacy. Like many Christian abolitionists, the Browns understood the Golden Rule as mandate to fight slavery by undermining it in overt and covert political acts, such as anti-slavery groups, participation in the Underground Railroad, and support of candidates who held similar opinions regarding slavery. John Brown's war on slavery was undoubtedly an extension of the Christian legacy of his family.

An evangelical Christian, he not only read the Bible as God's word, he read the Bible as God's word to John Brown. He believed that the scriptures continued to speak to life situations, radiating fresh truth and directives without obscuring its original and primary meaning. For him, God was speaking afresh on the enslavement of the African, and this was the ongoing theme of his devotional life. His piety was inseparable from his deeply felt call to destroy slavery...."

**Louis A. DeCaro, Jr. *Fire from the Midst of You: A Religious Life of John Brown*, 2005.**

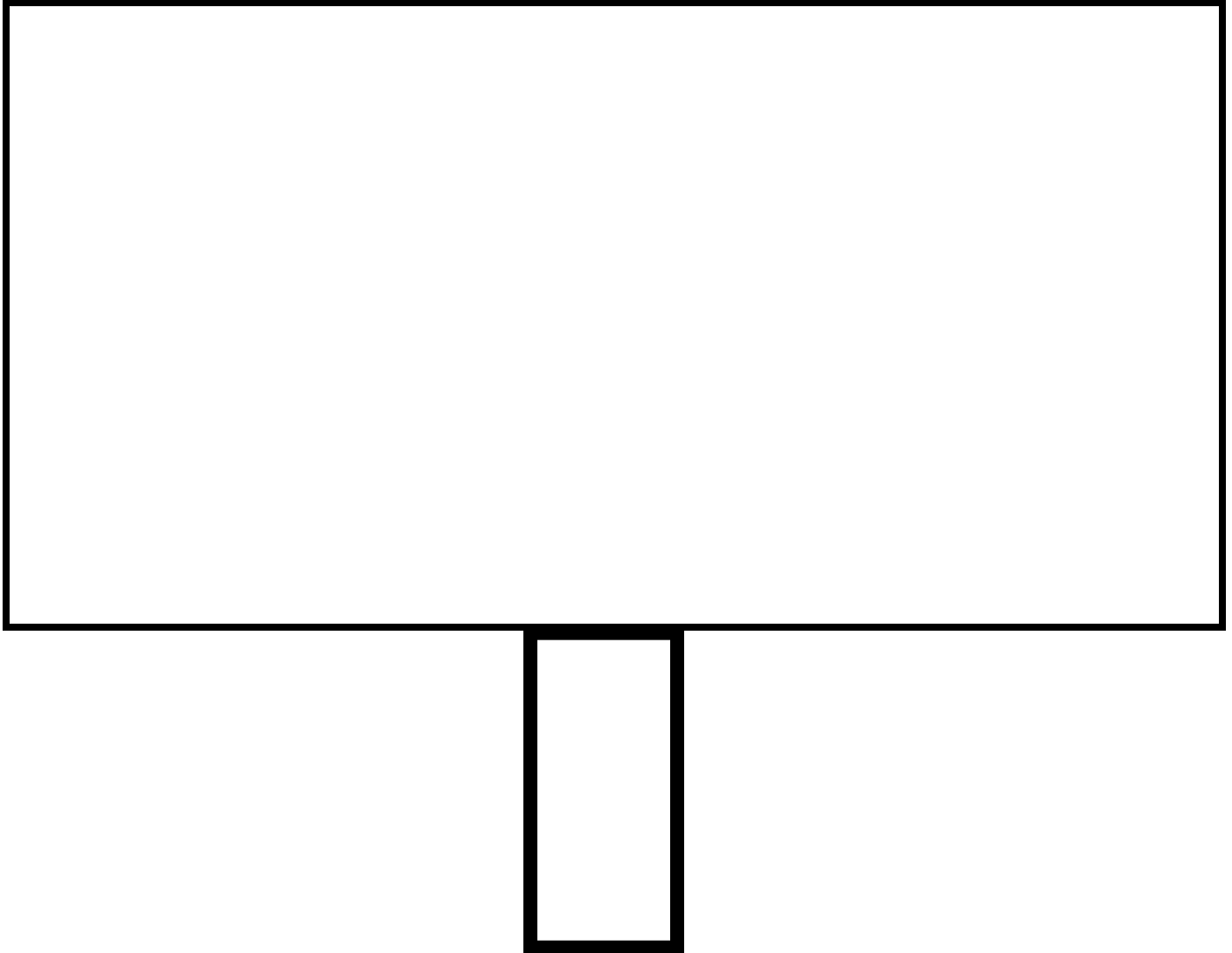
**Author's Thesis:**

**Quote to support the author's argument:**

## John Brown: A Historical Marker

You have been commissioned by the state of West Virginia Historical Trust to develop an historical marker that will be placed along the roadside adjacent to the area to the area impacted by John Brown and his followers. Your task is to develop the inscription for the marker that describes your interpretation of John Brown and his actions. Your inscriptions should take into account:

- John Brown's beliefs and the actions he took based on these beliefs (Kansas, Missouri, Harper's Ferry)
- The various reactions to John Brown (artistic, and other)



Why I came to this decision (What documents most impacted your decisions and why): \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## John Brown: Evaluating Historical Opinions

Use the following worksheet to record information from the various primary and secondary sources. When deciding the term that best describes the document's position regarding John Brown consider hero, villain, fanatic, religious, insane, leader, manipulative, brave, martyr, etc

**SOURCE 1: W.E.B. DuBois "John Brown"**  
Author's Thesis

Quote

Term

**SOURCE 4: James Schouler, *History of the United States under the Constitution***  
Author's Thesis

Quote

Term

**SOURCE 2: Hills Peebles Wilson, *John Brown Soldier of Fortune***

Author's Thesis

Quote

Term

**SOURCE 5: Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown***

Author's Thesis

Quote

Term

**SOURCE 3: Stephen Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood***

Author's Thesis

Quote

Term

**SOURCE 6: Malcolm X**

Author's Thesis

Quote

Term

