

# Choosing a Life with Principle: Henry David Thoreau and Captain John Brown

*Unit Plan for Grade 11, US History*

*Prepared by Jake Rhoades*

## OVERVIEW & PURPOSE

Prior to this lesson I will be doing a lecture/powerpoint about John Brown and the incident at Harpers Ferry. The students will also have read, *God's Angry Man: By Stephen B. Oates*. Oates article is a very good account on Brown's past and what lead to Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry. Along with giving background information about Brown and what transpired at Harpers Ferry we students have explored the question of whether Brown is a hero or villain, (revolutionary or terrorist). After the John Brown lesson it is important to ask students to consider the reaction of the country after news was heard of the Harpers Ferry plot.

"*Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!*" This is a very simple lesson plan, simply because it does not need to be overly complicated. After the lesson plan on John Brown and Harpers Ferry I would like to hear from the students about how they feel the country would have reacted. After this discussion the students are going to read some primary reaction accounts. The one that we will focus on here is, *A Plea for Captain John Brown: By Henry David Thoreau*. We are focusing on this account by Thoreau because it is a wonderfully passionate account about defending John Brown.

This unit can be broken up into a 2-3 days worth of lessons if one wants between your lecture, discussions, team assignment and individual writing assignment. One may want to give more time on the team assignment depending on the class (maybe even using a full class period). It really is up to the individual teacher as to how they would want to incorporate this. I suspect a lot of history teachers do lessons on John Brown and the Harpers Ferry raid, so adding the Thoreau essay at the very least would be a nice follow up. I have also included a link to the article *God's Angry Man: By Stephen B. Oates* if that could be of use to anyone.

## EDUCATION STANDARDS

1. Montana-Soc2.6 Analyze and evaluate conditions, actions, and motivations that contribute to conflict and cooperation within and among groups and nations.
2. Montana-SOC4.4b Analyze issues using historical evidence to form and support a reasoned position.

## Objectives

1. To observe the mood of the country after John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry through primary sources. The students will read *A plea for Captain John Brown* by Henry David Thoreau
2. To civilly debate the pros and cons of Henry David Thoreau's essay
3. Use reason to articulate thoughts on whether Thoreau's essay was reasonable or radical

## MATERIALS NEEDED

1. Butcher paper
2. Markers
3. Thinking caps
4. Links to Articles (You can use one or both)
  - a. God's Angry Man <http://www.jruppertatmcqaid.com/JohnBrownArticles.pdf>
  - b. A Plea for Brown: [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th\\_century/thoreau\\_001.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/thoreau_001.asp)

## Assignment One-activity: Reasonable or Radical

**After students have read *A Plea for Captain John Brown*:**

1. Break students into two teams
  - a. One group who believes that Thoreau's essay was reasonable
  - b. One group who believes that Thoreau's essay was radical

You can ask students to show of hands who is on the "reasonable or radical" side and come up with teams that way, or choose the teams at random.

2. Have a piece of butcher paper for students to write on and marker to write with

3. Give each team 10-15 minutes to write their responses as to whether Thoreau's essay was reasonable or radical
4. Give the teams another 10 minutes to write down what they believe are the most important quotes or passages that support their position
5. Have a spokesperson from each team discuss their team's position for 5 minutes in front of the class
6. Give each team a two-minute rebuttal
7. At the end of class ask whether or not any student's have changed their position regardless of the team that they were on, ask why they changed their mind?

### Assignment two-follow up-worksheet

After the team work is finished hand out the "10 essential questions" worksheet. The answers to these questions should be well thought out by the students (demonstrating knowledge of the time period that we are covering in this unit and the readings).

1. Define: principle (students may use dictionary)
2. Based on our readings did Brown and Thoreau live a life of principle?
3. Is Thoreau's writing a primary source document?
4. Thoreau writes of Brown that "He could not have been tried by a jury of his peers, because his peers did not exist." What does Thoreau mean by this?
5. What do you believe is the most important argument made by Thoreau in his defense of John Brown? Why?
6. What do you believe is the weakest defense made by Thoreau in his defense of John Brown? Why?
7. What are some key arguments that people might use to disagree with Thoreau?
8. How do you think most Northerners would have reacted to this essay?
9. Is there anything that seems prophetic in Thoreau's essay?
10. Is Thoreau being reasonable or radical in his essay?

#### Points per question

2 points-Student demonstrates understanding, complete sentences/thoughts

1 Point-demonstrates some understanding, but lacks thoroughness

0-Student lacked initiative in thought and writing skills

# Anti-Slavery

Most townspeople opposed the idea of slavery, but were divided on what to do about it. While some Concordians supported the anti-slavery crusade early on, others feared such activity would undermine the nation's political stability. Later, in the late 1840s, when it appeared that Southern slaveholders were gaining control of the national government, many people in Concord organized to oppose slavery.

*I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave's government also.... Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison.*

Henry D. Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience* (1849)

*Just put a fugitive slave who has taken the name of Henry Williams into the cars for Canada....Intended to dispatch him at noon through to Burlington, but when I went to buy his ticket, saw one at the depot who looked and behaved so much like a Boston policeman that I did not venture that time.*

Henry D. Thoreau, *Journal* (October 11, 1851)