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His Soul Is Marching On: The Abolitionist Spirit of John Brown

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In the time of Bleeding Kansas, a period of some of the most intense internal strife in US history, abolitionist John Brown was at the center of attention. His capture of Harpers Ferry and his public execution made him a symbol of the conflict within the nation, and it pushed the antislavery movement into the spotlight. Through speaking and through combat, the abolitionist spirit of John Brown divided America even further during the antebellum period. His great influence split up people for and against anti-slavery, both during his life and after his execution.

The United States had underlying movements of anti-slavery since its birth. Whether due to religious sentiments in the Quaker colonies or because of secular thought stemming from Enlightenment ideals of freedom and equality, slavery was never fully adopted by America. However, during the early 1800s, gradualism gave way to stronger proposals to let Blacks colonize elsewhere or to end slavery immediately (Kutler 208-209). The tension around the issue of slavery was mounting, with brutal laws such as the Fugitive Slave Act and the Dred Scott Supreme Court decision continuing to undermine the human rights of blacks despite the growing influence of the abolitionist movement. What caused the most tension, however, was the Kansas-Nebraska Act. This provision let the citizens of the territory to vote on the allowance of slavery. Because of this act, slave owners and abolitionists both flooded the territories in hopes of swinging the vote, and the violence was quick to follow. John Brown and his sons were among the “Free-Staters” that had come prepared to fight (Elliot).

Throughout his life, John Brown had always opposed slavery. Born on May 9, 1800, in Torrington, Connecticut, Brown was raised in an anti-slavery home. The son of devout Evangelical Calvinists (Taylor and Eldrid 11) and staunch abolitionists, Brown was exposed to anti-slavery movement even as a child (Britannica). As a boy, his family’s home was a part of the Underground Railroad network to transport freed slaves across the country in secret

(McGlone 54). When he moved to New York later in life, he settled his family in a black community founded on land donated by an antislavery philanthropist (Britannica). His convictions about the evils of slavery ran deep in both his faith and his family.

This passion for abolition, however, did not manifest itself in violence until much later in life, when he moved to Kansas in 1854 (Britannica). Brown's letters from before this time talk of no plans to use violence against slavery (McGlone 9). All his life, he hated slavery, but Kansas is where he gained a mistrust of the proslavery state government because they held up a law like the Kansas-Nebraska Act. "Kansas confirmed Brown's belief that slaveholders held the federal government hostage to their interests. Brown had reached a grim assessment of the possibility of slaveholders' redemption: Their 'proud hearts' would never yield to moral appeals" (McGlone 12). When in conflict with slaveowners and the viciousness that they fought and ruled with, it caused Brown to snap and turn to violence. This is where he came to believe that the institution of slavery denied God's will and the heritage of the freedom-fighting United States. There was no path forward but war (McGlone 12).

There were many abolitionist fighters in Bleeding Kansas, but what set John Brown apart was the fame and influence that he gained. The question of Brown's heroism or madness split the nation in two, but there is no doubt that his boldness at Harpers Ferry and his use of propaganda afterward were successful tools to gain a national platform.

Above everything else he did, Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry elevated him as the face of the abolitionist movement in Bleeding Kansas. Despite the discouragement of other abolitionists, such as Fredrick Douglass, Brown decided to capture the federal armory to obtain weapons to arm freed slaves and white abolitionists. This was part of his grand vision to war against the institution of slavery (Britannica). On the night of October 16, 1859, Brown and eighteen

followers seized the Harpers Ferry as well as Hall's Rifle Works located a half mile up the river. The raid was successful at first, however, after a few days, the local militia with the help of 85 US Marines took back the fort and captured Brown and his surviving men (McGlone 4-6).

This raid shocked the nation. Although it was unsuccessful, the raid was what launched John Brown and his ideas into the minds of the public. Brown's resourceful use of this failure helped him truly become the face of abolition during the time. Although he disliked what little schooling he had (Britannica), Brown was a master of the printed word (McGlone 203). Newspapers during this time did not typically commission reporters to interview public figures, but while he was in prison, Brown utilized the press attention through interviews to get his Christian, anti-slavery ideals into the papers. "As Henry David Thoreau described it, 'They did not hang him at once, but reserved him to preach to them . . . and so his victory was prolonged and completed. No theatrical manager could have arranged things so wisely to give effect to his behavior and words.'" (Taylor and Eldrid 31). He was not the first rebel to claim the attention of the public, but he made the best use of his fame (McGlone 203-204). Even though the raid didn't succeed, he met his capture, imprisonment, and execution with exuberance. He made the most of his opportunity, allowing him to claim true victory despite the failed operation at Harpers Ferry (Taylor and Eldrid 31).

Although he made good use of his voice during his time in prison, death was looming. He was charged by Virginia with treason, murder, and inciting slaves to rebellion. On December 2, 1847, John Brown was hanged (Britannica). According to Brown, though, his fight against slavery did not go to waste. "At his trial he declared he would 'forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood... with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments.'" (Britannica). By

combining his lifeblood with the “blood of millions,” Brown participates in and radicalizes the abolitionist passion against slave suffering. He knew that his time was up, but he knew that his death could be a proponent of the movement for which he fought. The best course of action would be to spin death towards martyrdom, crying before his death, “I submit; so let it be done!” (Taylor and Eldrid 31).

Brown’s execution was received in many different ways by the American public. For the most part, opinions on John Brown’s crimes and execution split from the North and the South. The question of John Brown as a martyr or a madman tore the nation in two. This disagreement only exasperated the already present conflict between the South declaring his insanity, and the North, eventually rallying behind Brown’s death.

The pro-slavery south never conceded that Brown had any righteousness. Accusations of insanity were supported both by Brown’s murderous rampages and by the mental illness that ran in his family. “Gideon Mills, a maternal uncle, swore in one of the affidavits that his mother had ‘been insane for a number of years before her death and died insane.’” (McGlone 155). Other relatives, such as his son Frederick, his eldest daughter, and siblings of his grandparents all dealt with serious mental illness both in the home and, in some cases, in the asylum.

The stronger reaction to Brown’s death, however, came from the North. Abolitionists seized this moment to push their cause. In the months following the execution, they recruited prominent American lecturers, writers, and antislavery sympathizers to write speeches essays that memorialized the famous Harper’s Ferry raid (Taylor and Eldrid 109). Among these writers were Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau. Their defense of Brown’s raid rescued the historical view on his death and it rallied people around the cause of antislavery.

Just as he asserted in *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau was supportive of any resistance to the state when an individual judged it to be corrupt. In this vein, Thoreau defended Brown's raid of Harper's Ferry. Although Brown may have been hard to defend due to his apparent madness, Thoreau "treated him as a man of principle: a liberator of slaves, the eloquent prisoner, and the noble martyr rather than the reckless revolutionary." (Meyer 309). Some accused him of having selective vision but Thoreau put Brown's motive as the defining characteristic of the fight (Meyer 312). "[Thoreau] like Brown accepted the necessity for violence as he indicated in 'A Plea' when he wrote that he 'shall not be forward to think him mistaken in his method who quickest succeeds to liberate the slave.'" (Meyer 312). Ralph Waldo Emerson also wrote to defend the actions of John Brown. In some ways, Brown was more important to Emerson than to Thoreau, because Brown played a role in his life. The Harper's Ferry raid was Emerson's chief opportunity to apply his ideas about individuality to current events. Recognizing Brown as a hero was developmental to Emerson (Ostrander 713). Together, Emerson and Thoreau shaped how people received John Brown's actions. "Emerson and Thoreau were important to the John Brown myth...as the foremost proponents of the rationale by which Brown and his defenders justified his most hideous acts-that any atrocity is justified if the motives of the doer are pure." (Ostrander 714). Their willingness to highlight his motives over his destruction cast a positive light on Brown and helped the American public rally behind the antislavery movement.

One final way that John Brown's legacy is seen is through the legendary hymn, "John Brown's Body." This song, with lyrics such as "Glory, glory hallelujah! His soul is marching on," offered a secular spin to Christ's death and resurrection. It quickly became a Union favorite after being sung at Fort Warren on May 12, 1861 (Taylor and Eldrid 27-28). The song was later rewritten with new lyrics to become "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," which became the

marching song of the North during the Civil War (Elliot). This hymn was another way that the Union opinion of John Brown shifted from seeing him as a rebel to a hero.

During the antebellum period, abolitionist John Brown greatly divided America over the issue of slavery. His capture of Harpers Ferry and his opportunistic use of his platform thereafter gave the antislavery movement a spotlight and helped shift Northern opinion increasingly against slavery. Both during his life and after his execution his influence and divisiveness split America in two. His soul is marching on!

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