

**Abolitionism Prior to the Civil War**

**John Brown Primary Source Excerpts and Argument-Based Questions**

**Debatable Issue: John Brown’s moral purpose and moral character mitigate**

**his crimes.**

**Document A: John Brown's Last Prophecy**   
  
Charlestown, Va, 2nd, December, 1859  
  
I John Brown am now quite **certain** that the crimes of this **guilty** **land**: **will** never be purged **away**; but with Blood. I had **as I now think**: **vainly** flattered myself that without **very much** bloodshed; it might be done.

Argument-Based Questions

1. Looking ahead just a bit in American history, is John Brown correct that slavery could only be “purged away but with Blood”? Does this prophecy provide any relevant context for his criminal actions?

(John Brown's last letter, written on day he hanged. From "John Brown: a Biography," by Oswald Garrison Villard.)  
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**Document B: Letter from Mahala Doyle**   
  
Altho' vengeance is not mine, I confess that I do feel gratified to hear that you were stopped in your fiendish career at Harper's Ferry, with the loss of your two sons, you can now appreciate my distress in Kansas, when you then and there entered my house at midnight and arrested my husband and two boys, and took them out of the yard and in cold blood shot them dead in my hearing. You can't say you done it to free slaves. We had none and never expected to own one...My son John Doyle whose life I begged of you is now grown up and is very desirous to be at Charlestown on the day of your execution.  
  
(A letter sent to John Brown while in jail. From "To Purge This Land with Blood" by Stephen Oates.)

Argument-Based Questions

1. With what emotion does Mahala Doyle write this letter to John Brown?

2. Identify two details from the letter that support the negative on our debatable issue. Identify one detail from the letter that (arguably) supports the affirmative. Be prepared to explain.

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**Document C: Letter from Frances Ellen Watkins**

Nov. 25, 1859

Dear Friend: Although the hands of Slavery throw a barrier between you and me, and

it may not be my privilege to see you in the prison house, Virginia has no bolts or bars

through which I dread to send you my sympathy...I thank you that you have been

brave enough to reach out your hands to the crushed and blighted of my race. You

have rocked the bloody Bastille; and I hope from your sad fate great good may arise

to the cause of freedom...

(A letter from Frances Watkins, a free black living in Kendallville, Indiana. From

"Freedom's Unfinished Revolution," by William Friedheim and The American Social

History Project.)

Argument-Based Questions

1. How does Frances Watkins feel toward John Brown and why does she feel this

way?

2. Does her letter suggest that John Brown was an inspiration to abolitionists and blacks struggling against slavery? Why or why not?

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**Document D: A Plea for Capt. John Brown**

By Henry David Thoreau

I am here to plead his cause with you. I plead not for his life, but for his character – his immortal life; and so it becomes your cause wholly, and is not his in the least.

Some eighteen hundred years ago Christ was crucified; this morning, perchance,

Captain Brown was hung. These are the two ends of a chain which is not without its

links. He is not Old Brown any longer; his is an angel of light.

(Read to the citizens of Concord, Mass., Sunday Evening, October 30, 1859.)

Argument-Based Questions

1. What underlying but bold claim is the famous American naturist and

Transcendentalist philosopher Henry David Thoreau making about John Brown in this passage?

2. Can John Brown be called a martyr, as Thoreau implies? Why or why not?

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**Document E: Richmond "Whig" Newspaper Editorial**   
  
Though it convert the whole Northern people, without an exception, into furious, armed abolition invaders, yet *old Brown will be hung*! That is the stern and irreversible decree, not only of the authorities of Virginia, but of the PEOPLE of Virginia, without a dissenting voice. And, therefore, Virginia, and the people of Virginia, will treat with the contempt they deserve, all the *craven appeals* of Northern men in behalf of old Brown's pardon. *The miserable old traitor and murderer belongs to the gallows*, and the gallows *will* have its own  
  
(Richmond "Whig" newspaper editorial quoted in the "Liberator", Nov. 18, 1859. From "John Brown: a Biography," by Oswald Villard)

Argument-Based Questions

1. With what emotion does Mahala Doyle write this letter to John Brown?

2. Identify two details from the letter that support the negative on our debatable issue. Identify one detail from the letter that (arguably) supports the affirmative. Be prepared to explain.

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**Document F: John Brown Writes from Jail**

Charlestown, Jefferson County, VA, Nov. 1, 1859

My Dear Friend E. B. of R. I. :

You know that Christ once armed Peter. So also in my case, I think he put a sword

into my hand, and there continued it, so long as he saw best, and then kindly took it

from me. I mean when I first went to Kansas. I wish you could know with what

cheerfulness I am now wielding the "Sword of the Spirit" on the right hand and on

the left. I bless God that it proves "mighty to the pulling down of strongholds." I

always loved my Quaker friends, and I commend to their kind regard my poor,

bereaved widowed wife, and my daughters and daughters-in-law, whose husbands fell

at my side. One is a mother and the other likely to become so soon. They, as well as

my own sorrow-stricken daughter[s], are left very poor, and have much greater need

of sympathy than I, who, through Infinite Grace and the kindness of strangers, am

"joyful in all my tribulations."

Your friend,

John Brown

(From "John Brown: A Biography," by Oswald Villard)

Argument-Based Questions

1. When he wrote this letter, John Brown was in prison, facing death by hanging.

How would you characterize his frame of mind? How is he facing his imminent execution?

2. Does this letter favor the affirmative or the negative in the upcoming Argument Exchange? Explain and support your answer.

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**Document G: John Brown’s Final Speech, at His Trial**

I have, may it please the court, a few words to say. In the first place, I deny everything but what I have all along admitted -- the design on my part to free the slaves. I intended certainly to have made a clean thing of that matter, as I did last winter when I went into Missouri and there took slaves without the snapping of a gun on either side, moved them through the country, and finally left them in Canada. I designed to have done the same thing again on a larger scale. That was all I intended. I never did intend murder, or treason, or the destruction of property, or to excite or incite slaves to rebellion, or to make insurrection.

I have another objection; and that is, it is unjust that I should suffer such a penalty. Had I interfered in the manner which I admit, and which I admit has been fairly proved (for I admire the truthfulness and candor of the greater portion of the witnesses who have testified in this case)--had I so interfered in behalf of the rich, the powerful, the intelligent, the so-called great, or in behalf of any of their friends--either father, mother, brother, sister, wife, or children, or any of that class--and suffered and sacrificed what I have in this interference, it would have been all right; and every man in this court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward rather than punishment.

This court acknowledges, as I suppose, the validity of the law of God. I see a book kissed here which I suppose to be the Bible, or at least the New Testament. That teaches me that all things whatsoever I would that men should do to me, I should do even so to them. It teaches me, further, to "remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them." I endeavored to act up to that instruction. I say I am yet too young to understand that God is any respecter of persons. I believe that to have interfered as I have done--as I have always freely admitted I have done--in behalf of His despised poor was not wrong, but right. Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments--I submit; so let it be done!

Let me say one word further.

I feel entirely satisfied with the treatment I have received on my trial. Considering all the circumstances it has been more generous than I expected. But I feel no consciousness of guilt. I have stated that from the first what was my intention and what was not. I never had any design against the life of any person, nor any disposition to commit treason, or excite slaves to rebel, or make any general insurrection. I never encouraged any man to do so, but always discouraged any idea of that kind.

Let me say also a word in regard to the statements made by some of those connected with me. I hear it has been stated by some of them that I have induced them to join me. But the contrary is true. I do not say this to injure them, but as regretting their weakness. There is not one of them but joined me of his own accord, and the greater part of them at their own expense. A number of them I never saw, and never had a word of conversation with till the day they came to me; and that was for the purpose I have stated.

Now I have done.

(John Brown’s Final Speech. November 2, 1859)

Argument-Based Questions

1. John Brown denies that he intended to anything at Harper’s Ferry other than free slaves. Is he credible when he denies intending to do anything illegal other than freeing slaves? Explain and support your response.

2. What is John Brown’s argument against the justice of his being given the death penalty?

3. How does John Brown bring his Christian faith into his statement to the court? Does his reference to Christian principles and beliefs support the affirmative in any way? If so, in what way?

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**Document H: Letter to John Brown in Prison**

Wayland [Mass.], October 26, 1859.

Dear Captain Brown: Though personally unknown to you, you will recognize in my name an earnest friend of Kansas, when circumstances made that Territory the battle-ground between the antagonistic principles of slavery and freedom, which politicians so vainly strive to reconcile in the government of the United States.

Believing in peace principles, I cannot sympathize with the method you chose to advance the cause of freedom. But I honor your generous intentions,-- I admire your courage, moral and physical. I reverence you for the humanity which tempered your zeal. I sympathize with you in your cruel bereavement, your sufferings, and your wrongs. In brief, I love you and bless you.

Thousands of hearts are throbbing with sympathy as warm as mine. I think of you night and day, bleeding in prison, surrounded by hostile faces, sustained only by trust in God and your own strong heart. I long to nurse you--to speak to you sisterly words of sympathy and consolation. I have asked permission of Governor Wise to do so. If the request is not granted, I cherish the hope that these few words may at least reach your hands, and afford you some little solace. May you be strengthened by the conviction that no honest man ever sheds blood for freedom in vain, however much he may be mistaken in his efforts. May God sustain you, and carry you through whatsoever may be in store for you! Yours, with heartfelt respect, sympathy and affection,

L. Maria Child.

(The letter above was written to John Brown while he was in prison, awaiting trial.)

Argument-Based Questions

1. L. Maria Child feels great sympathy for John Brown as he languishes in prison.

What are the primary reasons she feels this emotion for him? Cite textual evidence in your response.

2. Assuming that Ms. Child’s sentiments were shared by many of those who opposed slavery in the late 1850s and early 1860s in the U.S., what symbolic role do you think John Brown played for the abolitionist movement, based on what she expresses in her letter? Is the role he played for abolitionists relevant to the debatable issue? Why or why not?

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