

Overview

This lesson uses the mural, *Tragic Prelude*, by John Steuart Curry, to give students an understanding of John Brown as a controversial figure. The students will evaluate *Tragic Prelude* as a secondary source and then analyze primary sources that present conflicting perspectives on John Brown. Based on their findings they will use the primary sources to create their own interpretation of John Brown. The lesson is designed to be completed over two class periods.

Standards

Current standards can be found on ksks.org.

Objectives

Content:

- The student will explain why John Brown is a controversial figure.
- The student will describe John Brown's impact on "Bleeding Kansas."

Skills:

- The student will interpret primary sources to gain information.
- The student will use illustration to synthesize diverse viewpoints.

Essential Questions

- How would point of view influence an artist's or historian's representation of John Brown?
- Why is it important for historians to examine multiple primary sources when researching a topic?

Activities

This activity uses the following *Read Kansas!* cards:

- **Who is John Brown?**
- **Excerpt from “Parallels”**
- **Letter from John Brown to his family**
- **Letter from Salmon P. Chase**
- **Proclamation**
- **National Kansas Committee Resolution**

Day 1

1. Introduce the lesson by explaining that students will be using primary sources to develop their own interpretations or opinions of a famous Kansan. Have students begin by examining the painting, *Tragic Prelude*, on the **Who is John Brown?** *Read Kansas!* card. To help students focus on details, read the picture in quadrants. Students can use a sheet of paper with a quadrant cut out to cover three-quarters of the painting. After reading a section the student can flip the sheet until all quadrants are read. Another technique is to display the painting using SMART board technology or an Elmo projector and reveal one quadrant at a time.
 - a.) Make a list on the board or overhead of all the details the students see in the painting.
 - b.) Have students make observations about John Brown based on how he is portrayed and his environment in the painting, including how they think the artist felt about Brown.
 - c.) When finished have students read the back of the **Who is John Brown?** card to compare their assumptions, interpretations, and inferences with those of the artist. Reinforce that *Tragic Prelude* is a secondary source, just like a textbook. It is a person’s interpretation of John Brown.
2. Make sure the students understand the difference between primary and secondary sources. See For the Teacher.
3. Divide the class into groups of four or five students. Have each group read and discuss the five primary source *Read Kansas!* cards looking for information about John Brown. Each student should record observations and inferences on his or her own **Primary Sources on John Brown** worksheet.

Day 2

1. Using the information the student collected in the worksheet, the student will draw his or her own depiction of John Brown based on his or her interpretation of the primary sources. Each person will then present his or her picture and explain why this interpretation of John Brown was chosen and how it compares or contrasts with John Steuart Curry’s.
2. Close the lesson by using the essential questions for a class discussion.

Optional Activity: Instead of drawing a picture, have students write the text for a historic marker or road sign about John Brown.

Assessment

- Observe the student's ability to analyze and discuss the components and themes of *Tragic Prelude*.
- Evaluate the student's ability to identify the main points of primary sources.
- Evaluate the student's ability to create their own interpretation of John Brown.

For the Teacher

If you are using the textbook, *The Kansas Journey*, use pages 82-85 with this lesson.

Notes about primary sources:

- Primary sources are original items or records that have survived from the past. Examples include diaries, letters, photographs, paintings, artifacts, and newspaper articles. They are part of a direct personal experience of a time or event.
- A secondary source has been created by someone who has analyzed primary sources and produced a product related to the person or event, i.e. textbook, encyclopedia article, report for a class, biography, or a current newspaper article about events occurring in a time past, such as the admission of Kansas to the Union.

John Brown's "Parallels" was a letter written after one of his raids into Missouri that resulted in the Missouri governor mobilizing an effort to capture Brown and his followers. In "Parallels," Brown points out that a proslavery raid the previous year had killed several abolitionist settlers, and yet the government said little.

Definitions:

Armory – a place where weapons and munitions are manufactured and distributed to authorized entities.

Affidavit – a statement in writing made under oath before an authorized official for use in court proceedings.

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Resources for this lesson are from:

- Kansas Historical Society collections
- Library of Congress
- West Virginia State Archives
- The National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; purchased with major acquisition funds and with funds donated by Betty Adler Schermer in honor of her great-grandfather, August M. Bondi. NPG.96.123
- Getty Images

Primary Sources on John Brown Answer key:

Primary Source Title	Type of Source	Main point(s)
“Parallels”	Letter	John Brown freed slaves by force and took property from slave owners
<i>Directing John Brown to the Free State Camp</i>	Painting	Brown used a variety of tactics to monitor and combat proslavery forces
Letter from Salmon P. Chase	Letter	Many who wished for a free Kansas supported Brown’s actions
Pike	Artifact	Brown sought to end slavery through violence
Letter from Brown to his family	Letter	Brown cared about his family OR Brown left his family to pursue his cause
Affidavit of Mrs. Louisa Jane Wilkinson	Court Record	John Brown and his followers killed a man for his beliefs
Proclamation	Government document	Southerners feared Brown’s supporters and anticipated violence in retaliation for his hanging
Certificate of Authenticity	Business document	Brown stole property from proslavery settlers and sold it
National Kansas Committee Resolution	Political document	Many groups in North supported Brown’s actions in principle and monetarily
Photograph by Augustus Washington	Photograph	Brown made plans to combat slavery years before his move to Kansas Territory

Name _____

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