

John Brown, History's Greatest Hero (November 23, 1907)

The most picturesque character, the bravest man and most self-sacrificing soul in American history, was hanged at Charlestown, Virginia, December 2, 1859.

On that day Thoreau said:

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; he is an Angel of Light. * * *

I foresee the time when the painter will paint that scene, no longer going to Rome for a subject; the poet will sing it, the historian record it, and with the landing of the Pilgrims and the Declaration of Independence it will be the ornament of some future national gallery, when at least the present form of slavery shall be no more here. We shall then be at liberty to weep for Captain Brown.¹

Few people dared on that fateful day to breathe a sympathetic word for the grizzled old agitator. For years he had carried on his warfare against chattel slavery. He had only a handful of fanatical followers to support him. But to his mind his duty was clear, and that was enough. He would fight it out to the end, and if need be alone.

Old John Brown set an example of moral courage and of single-hearted devotion to an ideal for all men and for all ages.

With every drop of his honest blood he hated slavery, and in his early manhood he resolved to lay his life on Freedom's altar in wiping out that insufferable affliction. He never faltered. So God-like was his unconquerable soul that he dared to face the world alone. How perfectly sublime!

He did not reckon the overwhelming numbers against him, nor the paltry few that were on his side. This grosser aspect of the issue found no lodgment in his mind or heart. He was right and Jehovah was with him. His was not to reckon consequences, but to strike the immortal blow and step from the gallows to the throne of God.

Not for earthly glory did John Brown wage his holy warfare; not for any recognition or reward the people had it in their power to bestow. His

great heart was set upon a higher goal, animated by a loftier ambition. His grand soul was illumined by a sublimer ideal. A race of human beings, lowly and despised, were in chains, and this festering crime was eating out the heart of civilization.

In the presence of this awful plague logic was silent, reason dumb, pity dead.

The wrath of retributive justice, long asleep, awakened at last and hurled its lurid bolt. Old John Brown struck the blow and the storm broke. That hour chattel slavery was dead.

In the first frightful convulsion the slave power seized the grand old liberator by the throat, put him in irons and threw him into a dungeon to await execution.

Alas! it was too late. His work was done. All Virginia could do was to furnish the crown for his martyrdom.

Victor Hugo exclaimed in a burst of reverential passion: "John Brown is grander than George Washington!"²

History may be searched in vain for an example of noble heroism and sublime self-sacrifice equal to that of Old John Brown. From the beginning of his career to its close he had but one idea and one ideal, and that was to destroy chattel slavery; and in that cause he sealed his devotion with his noble blood. Realizing that his work was done, he passed serenely, almost with joy, from the scenes of men.

His calmness upon the gallows was awe-inspiring; his exaltation supreme.

Old John Brown is not dead. His soul still marches on, and each passing year weaves new garlands for his brow and adds fresh luster to his deathless glory.

Who shall be the John Brown of wage-slavery?

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¹ From "A Plea for Captain John Brown" (1859), by Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862). Thoreau delivered several lectures in Massachusetts in late October and early November on "The Character and Actions of Captain John Brown," attempting to rally public support for his case.

² On December 2, 1859, believing John Brown had received a last minute reprieve from execution, French novelist Victor Hugo wrote a letter to the *London News* extolling the condemned anti-slavery militant. In it, Hugo held up George Washington as "a majestic form" which "rises before the imagination" and

condemned the prospective killing in “the land of Washington” as an “irreparable fault” that would “penetrate the Union with a gaping fissure which would lead in its end to its entire disruption.” He concluded his appeal for clemency with the words “there is something more terrible than Cain slaying Abel: It is Washington slaying Spartacus.” It is unclear whether or where Hugo ever used the words attributed to him by Debs. Brown was in fact executed on the day Hugo wrote his letter.