For more than two months the twenty-one men hid in the cramped attic. They were mostly idealistic young men in their twenties, bound together during the tedious waiting by a common hatred of slavery. Now, on October 16, 1859, their leader, Old John Brown, revealed to them his final plan. The group comprised five blacks and sixteen whites, including three of the old man’s sons, Owen, Oliver, and Watson. For years Brown had nurtured the idea of striking a blow against the southern citadel of slavery. Tomorrow, he explained, they would move into Harpers Ferry, Virginia, and capture the town and its federal arsenal. As they gathered arms, slaves would pour from the surrounding countryside to join their army. Before the local militia had time to organize, Brown’s forces would escape to the nearby hills. From there, they would fight a guerrilla war until the curse of slavery had been exorcised and all slaves freed from bondage. No one among them questioned Brown or his plan.

An autumn chill filled the air, and a light rain fell as the war party made its way down the dark road toward Harpers Ferry. Three men had remained behind to handle supplies and arm slaves who took up the fight. A sleepy stillness covered the small town nestled in the hills where the Shenandoah joined the Potomac sixty miles from Washington, DC. It was a region of small farms and relatively few slaves. Most likely, the presence of the arsenal and an armory explains why Brown chose to begin his campaign there.

The attack began without a hitch. Two raiders cut telegraph lines running east and west from the town. The others seized a rifle works, the armory, and three hostages, including a local planter descended from the Washington family. Soon the sounds of gunfire drew the townspeople from their beds. Amid the confusion, the church bell pealed the alarm dreaded by so many whites throughout the South—slave insurrection! By late morning the hastily joined militia and armed farmers had trapped Brown and his men in the engine house of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. One son had been killed and another lay dying at his father’s side. Drunken crowds thronged
John Brown, man of action: After leading the Pottawatomie Massacre in Kansas in 1856, Brown grew a beard to disguise his appearance. His eastern abolitionist backers were impressed with the aura he radiated as a western man of action. The image was not hurt by the fact that Brown carried a bowie knife in his boot and regularly barricaded himself nights in his hotel rooms as a precaution against proslavery agents.

The streets crying for blood and revenge. When news of the raid reached Washington, President Buchanan dispatched federal troops under Colonel Robert E. Lee to put down the insurrection.

Thirty-six hours after the first shot, John Brown’s war on slavery ended. By any calculation the raid had been a total failure. Not a single slave had risen to join Brown’s army. Ten of the raiders lay dead or dying; the rest had been scattered or captured. Although wounded himself, Brown had miraculously escaped death. The commander of the assault force had tried to kill him with his dress sword, but it merely bent double from the force of the blow. Seven other people had been killed and nine more wounded during the raid.

Most historians would agree that the Harpers Ferry raid was to the Civil War what the Boston Massacre had been to the American Revolution: an incendiary event. In an atmosphere of aroused passions, profound suspicions, and irreconcilable differences, Brown and his men put a match to the fuse. Once their deed had been done and blood had been shed, there seemed to be no drawing back for either North or South. The shouts of angry men overwhelmed the voices of compromise.
From pulpits and public platforms across the North, leading abolitionists leapt to Brown's defense. No less a spokesman than Ralph Waldo Emerson pronounced the raider a "saint... whose martyrdom, if it shall be perfected, will make the gallows as glorious as the cross." Newspaper editor Horace Greeley called the raid "the work of a madman," for which he had nothing but the highest admiration. At the same time the defenders of national union and of law and order generally condemned Brown and his violent tactics. Such northern political leaders as Abraham Lincoln, Stephen Douglas, and William Seward spoke out against Brown. The Republican Party in 1860 went so far as to adopt a platform censuring the Harpers Ferry raid.

Moderate northern voices were lost, however, on southern fire-eaters, to whom all abolitionists and Republicans were potential John Browns. Across the South angry mobs attacked northerners regardless of their views on the slave question. Everywhere the specter of slave insurrection fed fears, and the uproar strengthened the hand of secessionists, who argued that the South's salvation lay in expunging all traces of northern influence.

THE MOTIVES OF A FANATIC

And what of the man who triggered all those passions? Had John Brown foreseen that his quixotic crusade would reap such a whirlwind of violence? On that issue both his contemporaries and historians have been sharply divided. Brown himself left a confusing and often contradictory record of his objectives. To his men, and to Frederick Douglass, the former slave and black abolitionist, Brown made clear he intended nothing less than to provoke a general slave insurrection. His preparations all pointed to that goal. He went to Harpers Ferry armed for such a task, and the choice of the armory as the raid's target left little doubt he intended to equip a slave army. But throughout the months of preparation, Brown had consistently warned the coconspirators financing his scheme that the raid might fail. In that event, he told them, he still hoped the gesture would so divide the nation that a sectional crisis would ensue, leading to the destruction of slavery.

From his jail cell and at his trial Brown offered a decidedly contradictory explanation. Ignoring the weapons he had accumulated, he suggested that the raid was intended as an extension of the Underground Railroad work he had previously done. He repeatedly denied any intention to commit violence or instigate a slave rebellion. "I claim to be here in carrying out a measure I believe perfectly justifiable," he told a skeptical newspaper reporter, "and not to act the part of an incendiary or ruffian, but to aid those [slaves] suffering great wrong." To Congressman Clement Vallandigham of Ohio, who asked Brown if he expected a slave uprising, the old man replied, "No sir; nor did I wish it. I expected to gather them up from time to time and set them free." In court, with his life hanging in the balance, Brown once again denied any violent intent. He sought only to expand his campaign for the liberation of slaves.

Brown's contradictory testimony has provoked much speculation over the man and his motives. Was he being quite rational and calculating in abruptly
John Brown, the impractical idealist: "The old idiot—the quicker they hang him and get him out of the way, the better." So wrote the editor of a Chicago paper to Abraham Lincoln. Many contemporaries shared the view of the cartoon reprinted here, that Brown was a foolish dreamer. Yet Brown had other ideas. "I think you are fanatical!" exclaimed one southern bystander after Brown had been captured. "And I think you are fanatical," Brown retorted. "'Whom the Gods would destroy they first made mad,' and you are mad."

changing his story after capture? Certainly, Brown knew how much his martyrdom would enhance the abolitionist movement. His execution, he wrote his wife, would "do vastly more toward advancing the cause I have earnestly endeavored to promote, than all I have done in my life before." On the other hand, perhaps Brown was so imbued with his own righteousness that he deceived himself into believing he had not acted the part of "incendiary or ruffian," but only meant to aid those slaves "suffering great wrong." "Poor old man!" commented Republican presidential hopeful Salmon Chase. "How sadly misled by his own imaginations!"

Yet for every American who saw Brown as either a calculating insurrectionist or a genuine, if self-deluded, martyr, there were those who thought him insane. How else could they explain the hopeless assault of eighteen men against a federal arsenal and the state of Virginia—where slaves were
“not abundant” and where “no Abolitionists were ever known to peep”? Who but a “madman” (to quote Greeley) could have concocted, much less attempted, such a wild scheme?

Nor was the issue of John Brown’s sanity laid to rest by his execution on December 2, 1859. Brown had become a symbol, for both North and South, of the dimensions of the sectional struggle, embodying the issues of the larger conflict in his own actions. Inevitably, the question of personal motivation becomes bound up in historians’ interpretations of the root causes of sectional and social conflict. Was Brown a heroic martyr—a white man in a racist society with the courage to lay down his life on behalf of his black brothers and the principles of the Declaration? Or was he an emotionally unbalanced fanatic whose propensity for wanton violence propelled the nation toward avoidable tragedy?

During the middle years of the twentieth century the view of Brown as an emotional fanatic gained ground. John Garraty, in a popular college survey text, described Brown as so “deranged” that rather than hang him for his “dreadful act . . . It would have been far wiser and more just to have committed him to an asylum.” Allen Nevins defined a middle ground when he argued that on all questions except slavery, Brown could act coherently and rationally. “But on this special question of the readiness of slavery to crumble at a blow,” Nevins thought, “his monomania . . . or his paranoia as a modern alienist [psychoanalyst] would define it, rendered him irresponsible.”

In 1970 Brown’s academic biographer, Stephen Oates, agreed that in many ways Brown was not “normal.” Yet Oates rejected the idea that insanity could either be adequately demonstrated or used in any substantive way to explain Brown’s actions. That Brown had an “excitable temperament” and a single-minded obsession with slavery Oates conceded. He concluded, too, that Brown was egotistical, an overbearing father, an often inept man worn down by disease and suffering, and a revolutionary who believed himself called to his mission by God.

But having said all that, Oates demanded that before they dismissed Brown as insane, historians must consider the context of Brown’s actions. To call him insane, Oates argued, “is to ignore the tremendous sympathy he felt for the black man in America.” And, he added, “to label him a ‘manic’ out of touch with ‘reality’ is to ignore the piercing insight he had into what his raid—whether it succeeded or whether it failed—would do to sectional tensions.”

Given such conflicting views on the question of John Brown’s sanity, it makes sense to examine more closely the evidence of his mental state. The most readily available material, and the most promising at first glance, was presented after the original trial by Brown’s attorney, George Hoyt. As a last-minute stratagem, Hoyt submitted nineteen affidavits from Brown’s friends and acquaintances, purporting to demonstrate Brown’s instability.

Two major themes appear in those affidavits. First, a number of people testified to a pronounced pattern of insanity in the Brown family, particularly on his mother’s side. In addition to his maternal grandmother and numerous uncles, aunts, and cousins, Brown’s sister, his brother Salmon, his
John Brown, martyr of freedom:

John Brown of Ossawatomie, they led him out to die;
And lo! a poor slave-mother with her little child pressed nigh,
Then the bold, blue eye grew tender, and the harsh face grew mild,
And he stooped between the jeering ranks and kissed the Negro's child!

John Greenleaf Whittier based this incident in his poem, "Brown of Ossawatomie" (December 1859), on an erroneous newspaper report. Apparently Brown did kiss the child of a white jailor he had befriended. Brown also remarked to the same jailer that "he would prefer to be surrounded in his last moments by a poor weeping slave mother with her children," noting that this "would make the picture at the gallows complete."

first wife, Dianthe, and his sons Frederick and John Jr. were all said to have shown evidence of mental disorders. Second, some respondents described certain patterns of instability they saw in Brown himself. Almost everyone
agreed he was profoundly religious and that he became agitated over the slavery question. A few traced Brown’s insanity back through his years of repeated business failures. The “wild and desperate” nature of those business schemes and the rigidity with which he pursued them persuaded several friends of his “unsound” mind and “monomania.”

Many old acquaintances thought that Brown’s controversial experiences in Kansas had unhinged the man. There, in May 1856, proslavery forces had attacked the antislavery town of Lawrence. In retaliation, Brown led a band of seven men (including four of his sons) in a midnight raid on some proslavery settlers at Pottawatomie Creek. Although the Pottawatomie residents had taken no part in the attack on faraway Lawrence, Brown’s men, under his orders, took their broadswords and hacked to death five of them. That grisly act horrified free-state and proslavery advocates alike. John Jr., one of Brown’s sons who had not participated in the raid, suffered a nervous breakdown from his own personal torment and from the abuse he received after being thrown into prison. Another of Brown’s sons, Frederick, was murdered a few months later in the civil war that swiftly erupted in Kansas.

Thus a number of acquaintances testified in 1859 that from the time of the Pottawatomie killings onward, Brown had been mentally deranged. E. N. Sill, an acquaintance of both Brown and his father, admitted that he had once had considerable sympathy for Brown’s plan to defend antislavery families in Kansas. “But from his peculiarities,” Sill recalled, “I thought Brown
an unsafe man to be commissioned with such a matter." It was Sill who suggested the idea, which Allen Nevins later adopted, that on the slavery question alone Brown was insane. "I have no confidence in his judgment in matters appertaining to slavery," he asserted. "I have no doubt that, upon this subject . . . he is surely as monomaniac as any inmate in any lunatic asylum in the country." David King, who talked to Brown after his Kansas experience, observed that "on the subject of slavery he was crazy" and that Brown saw himself as "an instrument in the hands of God to free slaves."

Such testimony seems to support the view that Harpers Ferry was the outcome of insanity. Yet even then and ever since, many people have rejected that conclusion. Confronted with the affidavits, Governor Henry Wise of Virginia thought to have Brown examined by the head of the state's insane asylum. Upon reflection he changed his mind. Wise believed Brown perfectly sane and had even come to admire begrudgingly the old man's "indomitable" spirit. Wise once described Brown as "the gamest man I ever saw."

For what it is worth, Brown himself rejected any intimation that he was anything but sane. He refused to plead insanity at his trial and instead adopted the posture of the self-sacrificing revolutionary idealist. For him, slavery constituted an unethical and unconstitutional assault of one class of citizens against another. Under that assault, acts that society deemed unlawful—dishonesty, murder, theft, or treason—could be justified in the name of a higher morality.

Furthermore, Oates and other historians have attacked the affidavits presented by Hoyt as patently unreliable. Many people had good reason to have Brown declared insane. Among those signing the affidavits were friends and relatives who hoped Governor Wise would spare Brown's life. Might they not have exaggerated the instances of mental disorders in his family to make their case more convincing? Most had not taken Brown's fanaticism seriously until his raid on Harpers Ferry. That event, as much as earlier observation, had shaped their opinions. Just as important, none of them had any medical training or experience that would qualify them to determine with any expertise whether Brown or any member of his family could be judged insane. Only one affidavit came from a doctor, and like most physicians of the day, he had no particular competence in psychological observation.

Although it would be foolish to suggest that we in the twentieth century are better judges of character than our forebears, it is fair to say that at least we have a better clinical understanding of mental disorders. Many symptoms that in the nineteenth century were lumped together under the term insanity have since been identified as a variety of very different diseases, each with its own distinct causes. Among those "crazy" Brown relatives were those who, based on the descriptions in the affidavits, may have suffered from senility, epilepsy, Addison's disease, or brain tumors. Thus the "preponderance" of insanity in Brown's family could well have been a series of unrelated disorders. Even if the disorders were related, psychologists today still hotly debate the extent to which psychological disorders are inheritable.
The insanity defense also had considerable appeal to political leaders. Moderates from both North and South, seeking to preserve the Union, needed an argument to soften the divisive impact of Harpers Ferry. If Brown were declared insane, northern abolitionists could not so easily portray him as a martyr. Southern secessionists could not treat Brown as typical of all northern abolitionists. As a result, their argument that the South would be safe only outside the Union would have far less force. Even antislavery Republicans tried to dissociate themselves from Brown's more radical tactics. During the 1859 congressional elections, the Democrats tried to persuade voters that Harpers Ferry resulted inevitably from the Republicans' appeal to the doctrine of "irresistible conflict" and "higher law" abolitionism. To blunt such attacks, leading Republicans regularly attributed the raid to Brown's insanity.

Clearly, the affidavits provide only the flimsiest basis for judging the condition of Brown's mental health. But some historians have argued that the larger pattern of Brown's life demonstrated his imbalance. Indeed, even the most generous biographers must admit that Brown botched miserably much that he attempted to do. In the years before moving to Kansas, Brown had tried his hand at tanning, sheepherding, surveying, cattle driving, and wool merchandising—all with disastrous results. By 1852 he had suffered fifteen business failures in four different states. Creditors were continually hounding him. "Over the years before his Kansas escapade," John Garraty concluded, "Brown had been a drifter, horse thief and swindler, several times a bankrupt, a failure in everything he attempted."

But this evidence, too, must be considered with circumspection. During the period Brown applied himself in business, the American economy went through repeated cycles of boom and bust. Many hardworking entrepreneurs lost their shirts in business despite their best efforts. Brown's failures over the years may only suggest that he did not have an aptitude for business. His schemes were usually ill-conceived, and he was too inflexible to adapt to the rapidly changing business climate. But to show that Brown was a poor businessman and that much of his life he pursued the wrong career hardly proves him insane. Under those terms, much of the adult population in the United States would belong in asylums.

To call Brown a drifter is once again to condemn most Americans. Physical mobility has been such a salient trait of this nation that one respected historian has used it to distinguish the national character. During some periods of American history as much as 20 percent of the population has moved each year. In the 1840s and 1850s, a whole generation of Americans shared Brown's dream of remaking their fortunes in a new place. Many like him found the lure of new frontiers irresistible. And just as many failed along the way, only to pack up and try again.

The accusation that Brown was a swindler, while containing a measure of truth, convicts him on arbitrary evidence. After several of his many business disasters, creditors hounded him in the courts. A few accused him of fraud. Yet Simon Perkins, an Ohio businessman who lost more money to Brown
and who was more familiar with his business practices than anyone else, never accused Brown of swindling, even when the two dissolved their partnership in 1854. Again, it was poor business sense rather than a desire to swindle that led Brown into his difficulties.

The horse-thievery charge hinges on the observer's point of view. During the years of fighting in Kansas, Brown occasionally "confiscated" horses from proslavery forces. Those who supported his cause treated the thefts as legitimate acts of war. Brown's enemies never believed he was sincere in his convictions. They accused him of exploiting the tensions in Kansas to act like a brigand. But it is far from clear that Brown ever stole for personal gain. Whatever money he raised, save for small sums he sent his wife, went toward organizing his crusade against slavery. Besides, it is one thing to establish Brown's behavior as antisocial and quite another to find him insane.

From the point of view of the "facts of the case," the question of insanity cannot be easily resolved. The issue becomes further muddled when we consider its theoretical aspects. Theory, as we saw when examining Andrew Jackson, will inevitably affect any judgment in the case. The question, was John Brown insane? frames our inquiry and determines the kind of evidence being sought. And in this case, the question is particularly controversial because it remains unclear just exactly what we are asking. What does it mean, after all, to be "insane"?

Modern psychologists and psychiatrists have given up using the concept of insanity diagnostically because it is a catchall term and too unspecific to have definite meaning. The only major attempt to define the concept more precisely has been in the legal world. In civil law, insanity refers to the inability of individuals to maintain contractual or other legal obligations. Thus, to void a will, an injured party might try to demonstrate that at the time of composition its author was not "of sound mind"—that is, not responsible for his or her actions. Insanity is considered sufficient grounds to commit an individual to a mental hospital. But since it involves such a curtailment of rights and freedom, it is extremely difficult to prove and generally requires the corroboration of several disinterested professionals.

Insanity has been widely used as a defense in criminal cases. By demonstrating that at the time of the crime a client could not distinguish right from wrong or was incapable of determining the nature of the act committed, a lawyer can protect the accused from some of the legal consequences of the act. To find Brown insane, as attorney Hoyt attempted to have the court do, would have been to assert Brown's inability to understand the consequences of his actions at Harpers Ferry. The raid would represent the irrational anger of a deranged man, deserving pity rather than hatred or admiration.

In the legal sense, then, Brown would have to be considered fit to stand trial. He may have been unrealistic in estimating his chance of success at Harpers Ferry, but he repeatedly demonstrated that he knew the consequences of his actions: that he would be arrested and punished if caught; that large portions of American society would condemn him; that, nevertheless,
he believed himself in the right. In the legal sense, Brown was quite sane and
clearheaded about his actions.

**THE TURBULENT CURRENTS**
**OF PSYCHOHISTORY**

Yet the court's judgment, accurate as it may have been, is likely to leave us
uneasy. To have Brown pronounced sane or insane, in addition to guilty or
not guilty, does little to explain, deep down, why the man acted as he did.
The verdict leaves us with the same emptiness that impelled psychologists to
reject the whole concept of insanity. What drove John Brown to crusade
against slavery? To execute in cold blood five men along a Kansas creek? To
lead twenty-one men to Harpers Ferry? Other northerners abhorred the in-
stitution of slavery, yet only John Brown acted with such vehemence. In that
sense he was far from being a normal American; far, even, from being a nor-
mal abolitionist. How can we begin to understand the intensity of his deeds?

Here we approach the limits of explanations based on rational motives. To
describe John Brown simply by referring to his professed and undoubtedly
sincere antislavery ideology is to leave unexplored the fire in the man. Such
an approach assumes too easily that consciously expressed motives can be
taken at face value. Yet we have already seen, in the case of the bewitched at
Salem, that unconscious motivations often play important roles in human
behavior. If we are willing to grant that apparently "normal" people some-
times act for reasons beyond those they consciously express, how much more
likely is it that we must go beyond rational motives in understanding Brown?
It seems only logical that historians should bring to bear the tools of mod-
ern psychology to assess the man's personality.

Indeed, a subbranch of history has applied such methods to a wide variety
of historical problems. Known as psychohistory, this approach has most often
drawn on the discipline of psychoanalysis pioneered by Sigmund Freud, an
Austrian physician who propounded his theories during the early twentieth
century. Freud assumed that every individual experiences intensely personal
conflicts in life that are extremely difficult to resolve. When a person resists
coming to terms with such situations in an open and direct manner, that
person represses the conflict; that is, he or she is *unable* to think about it
consciously. Under such conditions the conflict does not go away; it is
merely forced to express itself indirectly. The surface manifestations are dis-
guised in neurotic symptoms such as obsessions, nervous tics, or hysterical
behaviors.

By exploring a patient's life history through a process of free association
about memories, dreams, and fantasies, the psychoanalyst takes the frag-
ments of evidence presented by the patient and guides him or her toward a
recognition of the unconscious forces that have shaped the personality. Thus
the analyst seeks to explore the territory of the unconscious much as the his-
tonian seeks to make sense out of the jumble of documentary evidence.
What sort of map to the unconscious does Freudian analysis supply? Freud called special attention to two areas he believed were the source of much tension and conflict: instinctual sexual drives and the formative experiences of infancy and childhood. Consider two examples. Every infant receives its first nourishment of mother's milk from the nipple. (More recently, of course, the baby bottle has sometimes served as a substitute.) Freud suggested that every baby experiences a crisis when the mother weans the child from her breast. The infant, Freud argued, has become accustomed to this constant gratification from the mother and experiences rage when the breast is withheld.

Even more famous among Freudian concepts is the notion of an oedipal conflict in young boys. The concept draws its name from Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, a Greek tragedy in which Oedipus unknowingly commits incest with his mother. For this "crime" he suffers blindness and exile. Freud contended that somewhere between the ages of three and six, every boy normally passes through an "oedipal phase," during which his consciousness of erotic gratification intensifies. The natural object of attraction is the woman closest to the boy—his mother. Yet the child is aware that this love object is forbidden; it belongs to his father, and therefore the child fears his father's imagined jealous rage.

Many of Freud's concepts—and these examples are only two, sketched in briefest outline—strike laypeople as not only counterintuitive but far-fetched. Yet Freud's psychological principles received increasing respect and attention in the first three decades of the twentieth century, both in the medical community and among the broader public. Psychoanalysts were (and still are) trained in his methods, and patients undergo therapy that often lasts for years. Although controversial among historians, psychoanalytic theory came to be used by an increasing minority of them. In Chapter 5 for example, we noted that Michael Rogin, writing in the 1970s, analyzed Andrew Jackson from the point of view of his role in removing Indians from the Old Southwest. But Rogin also argued that to explain Indian removal, historians could not rely merely on the motives of simple land hunger and material greed. Using Freudian theory, he pointed out that white-Indian relations during the Jacksonian era were fraught with parent-child symbolism. White treaty negotiators constantly urged Indians to make peace with their "white father," the president of the United States. If friendly tribes did not conclude treaties, Jackson once warned, "We may then be under the necessity of raising the hatchet against our own friends and brothers. Your father the President wishes to avoid this unnatural state of things."

Pursuing the Freudian focus on childhood, Rogin suggested that Jackson's well-known temper as an adult might be connected to the kinds of infant rages posited by Freud. Did the death of Jackson's father before he was born affect Jackson's mother during his infancy? Rogin wondered. "Problems in infancy, involving feeding, weaning, or holding the child, often intensify infantile rage and accentuate later difficulties in the struggle of the child to break securely free of the mother." Rogin quoted Jefferson's description of Jackson "choking with rage" on the Senate floor; he also noted that
according to eyewitnesses, Jackson often slobbered and spoke incoherently when excited or angry. "Jackson's slobbering," argued Rogin, "suggests early problems with speech, mouth, and aggression. Speech difficulties often indicate a problematic oral relationship."

In the 1980s and 1990s, however, Freudian theory came under broad attack. Medicine, which for many years had been an art as much as a science, increasingly demanded that hypotheses be rigorously tested and confirmed by replicable experiments. By their very nature, Freudian theories about the unconscious dealt with propositions that were either unverifiable or extremely difficult to confirm. In addition, as more of Freud's letters and papers became public, they shed doubts on the methods of the master. (For years many papers had been available only to scholars sympathetic to psychoanalysis.) Freud established his psychoanalytic method, for example, when treating thirteen young women who he said recounted tales of being seduced when they were children. In fact, Freud's papers reveal that the girls had no such recollections until after his analysis was in full swing. Even after Freud used, in his own words, the "strongest compulsion" to "induce" his patients to free-associate or fantasize such stories, he admitted that "they have no feeling of remembering the scenes." This revelation goes to the heart of the evidentiary problem. If such memories are not part of the patient's recollection until an analyst strongly induces them, how can we decide whether the memories truly spring from the unconscious rather than merely from the suggestive comments of the analyst?

Given the strong challenges to Freudian theory, its value for analyzing any person seems at the very least in serious doubt—let alone for analyzing a historical figure like John Brown, who cannot be subjected to a process of lengthy psychoanalysis on the couch. Must we throw up our hands at the possibility of understanding the inner workings of Brown's deepest motivations? It seems to us that the historian still has options.

Even Frederick Crews, one of Freud's most vocal literary critics, has suggested that it is possible to "dissent" from the rigid orthodoxy of psychoanalytic theory "without forsaking the most promising aspects of psychoanalysis—its attentiveness to signs of conflict, its hospitality to multiple significance, its ideas of ambivalence, identification, repression, and projection." Freud wished his patients to free-associate about childhood experiences in part because he recognized that unexpected patterns often emerged from these memories: recurring images, fears, preoccupations. Psychologists—whether they are strict Freuds or not—have learned to pay close attention to such patterns.

**THE MOTIVES OF A SON—**
**AND A FATHER**

Although John Brown never underwent a psychological examination about his childhood, he has provided us, as it happens, with the means of conducting one ourselves. At the age of fifty-seven, Brown wrote a long letter ad-
dressed to a thirteen-year-old boy named Harry Stearns. Harry was the son of one of Brown's wealthiest financial patrons. In the letter, Brown told the story of “a certain boy of my acquaintance” who, “for convenience,” he called John. This name was especially convenient because the boy was none other than Brown himself. The letter is one of the few surviving sources of information about Brown's childhood. It is reprinted here with only a few omissions of routine biographical data.

I can not tell you of anything in the first Four years of John's life worth mentioning save that at that early age he was tempted by Three large Brass Pins belonging to a girl who lived in the family & stole them. In this he was detected by his Mother; & after having a full day to think of the wrong; received from her a thorough whipping. When he was Five years old his Father moved to Ohio, then a wilderness filled with wild beasts, & Indians. During the long journey, which was performed in part or mostly with an ox-team; he was called on by turns to assist a boy Five years older (who had been adopted by his Father & Mother) & learned to think he could accomplish smart things by driving the Cows; & riding the horses. Sometimes he met with Rattle Snakes which were very large; & which some of the company generally managed to kill. After getting to Ohio in 1805 he was for some time rather afraid of the Indians, & of their Rifles; but this soon wore off; & he used to hang about them quite as much as was consistent with good manners; & learned a trifle of their talk. His father learned to dress Deer Skins, & at 6 years old John was installed a young Buck Skin. He was perhaps rather observing as he ever after remembered the entire process of Deer Skin dressing; so that he could at any time dress his own leather such as Squirel, Raccoon, Cat, Wolf and Dog Skins, and also learned to make Whip Lashes, which brought him some change at times, & was of considerable service in many ways. At Six years old he began to be a rambler in the wild new country finding birds and squirrels and sometimes a wild Turkey's nest. But about this period he was placed in the school of adversity; which my young friend was a most necessary part of his early training. You may laugh when you come to read about it; but these were sore trials to John: whose earthly treasures were very few & small. These were the beginning of a severe but much needed course of discipline which he afterwards was to pass through; & which it is to be hoped has learned him before this time that the Heavenly Father sees it best to take all the little things out of his hands which he has ever placed in them. When John was in his Sixth year a poor Indian boy gave him a Yellow Marble the first he had ever seen. This he thought a great deal of; & kept it a good while; but at last he lost it beyond recovery. It took years to heal the wound & I think he cried at times about it. About Five months after this he caught a young Squirrel tearing off his tail in doing it; & getting severely bitten at the same time himself. He however held on to the little bob tail Squirrel; & finally got him perfectly tamed, so that he almost idolized his pet. This too he lost; by its wandering away; or by getting killed; & for a year or two John was in mourning; & looking at all the Squirrels he could see to try & discover Bobtail, if possible. I must not neglect to tell you of a very
bad and foolish habit to which John was somewhat addicted. I mean telling lies; generally to screen himself from blame; or from punishment. He could not well endure to be reproached; & I now think had he been oftener encouraged to be entirely frank; by making frankness a kind of atonement for some of his faults; he would not have been so often guilty of this fault; nor have been (in after life) obliged to struggle so long with so mean a habit.

John was never quarrelsome; but was excessively fond of the hardest & roughest kind of plays; & could never get enough [of them]. Indeed when for a short time he was sometimes sent to School the opportunity it afforded to wrestle & Snow ball & run & jump & knock off old seedy Wool hats; offered to him almost the only compensation for the confinement, & restraints of school. I need not tell you that with such a feeling & but little chance of going to school at all: he did not become much of a scholar. He would always choose to stay at home & work hard rather than be sent to school; & during the warm season might generally be seen barefooted & bareheaded: with Buck skin Breeches suspended often with one leather strap over his shoulder but sometimes with Two. To be sent off through the wilderness alone to very considerable distances was particularly his delight; & in this he was often indulged so that by the time he was Twelve years old he was sent off more than a Hundred Miles with companies of cattle; & he would have thought his character much injured had he been obliged to be helped in any such job. This was a boyish kind of feeling but characteristic however.

At Eight years old, John was left a Motherless boy which loss was complete and permanent for notwithstanding his Father again married to a sensible intelligent, and on many accounts a very estimable woman: yet he never adopted her in feeling; but continued to pine after his own Mother for years. This operated very unfavorably upon him: as he was both naturally fond of females; & withall, extremely diffident; & deprived him of a suitable connecting link between the different sexes; the want of which might under some circumstances, have proved his ruin ....

During the war with England [in 1812] a circumstance occurred that in the end made him a most determined Abolitionist: & led him to declare, or Swear: Eternal war with Slavery. He was staying for a short time with a very gentlemanly landlord since a United States Marshall who held a slave boy near his own age very active, intelligent and good feeling; & to whom John was under considerable obligation for numerous little acts of kindness. The master made a great pet of John: brought him to table with his first company; & friends; called their attention to every little smart thing he said or did: & to the fact of his being more than a hundred miles from home with a company of cattle alone; while the negro boy (who was fully if not more than his equal) was badly clothed, poorly fed; & lodged in cold weather; & beaten before his eyes with Iron Shovels or any other thing that came first to hand. This brought John to reflect on the wretched, hopeless condition, of Fatherless & Motherless slave children: for such children have neither Fathers or Mothers to protect, & provide for them. He sometimes would raise the question is God their Father? . . .

I had like to have forgotten to tell you of one of John's misfortunes which set rather hard on him while a young boy. He had by some means perhaps by gift of
his father become the owner of a little Ewe Lamb which did finely till it was about Two Thirds grown; & then sickened & died. This brought another protracted mourning season: not that he felt the pecuniary loss so much: for that was never his disposition; but so strong & earnest were his attachments.

John had been taught from earliest childhood to "fear God and keep his commandments;" & though quite skeptical he had always by turns felt much serious doubt as to his future well being; & about this time became to some extent a convert to Christianity & ever after a firm believer in the divine authenticity of the Bible. With this book he became very familiar, & possessed a most unusual memory of its entire contents.

Now some of the things I have been telling of are just such as I would recommend to you: & I would like to know that you had selected these out, & adopted them as part of your own plan of life; & I wish you to have some definite plan. Many seem to have none; & others never stick to any that they do form. This was not the case with John. He followed up with tenacity whatever he set about as long as it answered his general purpose; & hence he rarely failed in some good degree to effect the things he undertook. This was so much the case that he habitually expected to succeed in his undertakings. With this feeling should be coupled, the consciousness that our plans are right in themselves.

During the period I have named, John had acquired a kind of ownership to certain animals of some little value but as he had come to understand that the title of minors might be a little imperfect: he had recourse to various means in order to secure a more independent; & perfect right of property. One of those means was to exchange with his Father for something of far less value. Another was by trading with others persons for something his Father had never owned. Older persons have some times found difficulty with titles.

From Fifteen to Twenty years old, he spent most of his time working at the Tanner & Currier's trade keeping Bachelors hall; & he officiating as Cook; & for most of the time as foreman of the establishment under his Father. During this period he found much trouble with some of the bad habits I have mentioned & with some that I have not told you off: his conscience urging him forward with great power in this matter; but his close attention to business; & success in its management, together with the way he got along with a company of men, & boys; made him quite a favorite with the serious & more intelligent portion of older persons. This was so much the case: & secured for him so many little notices from those he esteemed: that his vanity was very much fed by it: & he came forward to manhood quite full of self-conceit; & self-confident; notwithstanding his extreme bashfulness. A younger brother used sometimes to remind him of this: & to repeat to him this expression which you may somewhere find, "A King against whom there is no rising up." The habit so early formed of being obeyed rendered him in after life too much disposed to speak in an imperious or dictating way. From Fifteen years & upward he felt a good deal of anxiety to learn; but could only read & study a little; both for want of time; & on account of inflammation of the eyes. He however managed by the help of books to make himself tolerably well acquainted with common arithmetic, & Surveying, which he practiced more or less after he was Twenty years old.
Before exploring the letter's deeper psychological significance, it may be worth reminding ourselves what a straightforward reading of the document provides. Attention would naturally center on Brown's striking tale of how, as a twelve-year-old, he was first roused to oppose slavery. Shocked by the cruel treatment of his young black friend, John was further incensed by the unfair and contrasting treatment he benefited from simply because he was white. This vivid, emotional experience seems to go a good way toward explaining why the evil of slavery weighed so heavily on Brown's mind. In an article on the motivations behind the raid at Harpers Ferry, this anecdote is quite clearly the one piece of evidence worth extracting from the long letter. The additional material on Brown's childhood, which often seems to ramble incoherently, might be included in a book-length biography of Brown but hardly seems relevant to an article that must quickly get to the heart of the man's involvement with abolition.

Yet when we look more closely, Brown's story of the mistreated young slave does not go very far toward explaining Brown's motives. In a land where slavery was central to the culture, hundreds, even thousands, of young white boys must have had experiences in which black playmates were unfairly whipped, degraded, and treated as inferiors. Nonetheless, many of those boys went on to become slaveholders. Furthermore, although some undoubtedly developed a strong dislike of slavery (Abraham Lincoln among them!), none felt compelled to mount the kind of campaigns Brown did in Kansas and at Harpers Ferry. Why did Brown's rather commonplace experience make such a strong impression on him?

The answer to that question may be learned if we do not dismiss the other portions of Brown's childhood experiences as irrelevant but instead examine them for clues to his psychological development. So let us turn, for a moment, from a direct examination of Brown's abolitionism to the other elements of the letter to Harry Stearns. In doing so we must consider each of Brown's stories, illustrations, and comments with care, keeping in mind Freud's stress on unconscious motivations. In previous chapters we have seen that historians must always treat primary sources skeptically, identifying the personal perspectives and biases that may influence the writer. Psychoanalytic theory requires us to take that skepticism one step further, assuming not only that the evidence may be influenced by unstated motivations (such as Brown's wishing to impress Harry Stearns's father with his virtue) but also that some, even the most powerful of Brown's motivations, may be unconscious—hidden even from Brown himself.

At first glance the narrative appears to recount fairly ordinary events in a child's life. Who, after all, has not cried one time or another at the loss of a pet, or has not been proud of accomplishments like driving cows and riding horses? Yet we must remember that these events are only a few selected from among thousands in Brown's childhood, events meaningful enough to him

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1. As a young man, Lincoln was reputed to have been strongly moved by the sight of slaves being auctioned in New Orleans.
that he has remembered and related them more than fifty years later. Why
did Brown retain these memories rather than others? What suggestive im-
ages and themes recur? Because psychoanalytic theory emphasizes the im-
portance of parental relationships, we may begin by examining Brown's
relationship with his mother and father.

Of the two parents, John's mother is the most visible in this letter, and it is
clear that Brown loved her dearly. Notice the language describing his
mother's death. "John was left a Motherless boy," he writes—not the simpler
and less revealing, "John's mother died," which places the emphasis on the
mother rather than on the loss incurred by the "Motherless boy." Further-
more, the loss was "complete and permanent." Brown never grew to love his
new mother and "continued to pine after his own Mother for years."

John's father, at first glance, appears to have taken a less prominent role
in the letter, either positively or negatively. True, Owen Brown does teach
John the art of dressing skins (and also, John takes care to note, of making
"Whip Lashes"); but the attention centers not on the father's devoted teach-
ing so much as John's remarkable ability to learn by watching his father only
once. Perhaps most revealing, however, is an ambiguous passage in which
Brown's father does not appear yet plays a substantial, hidden role. The rel-
levant paragraph begins by noting that John "had acquired a kind of owner-
ship to certain animals of some little value." From earlier parts of the letter,
we are aware how much these pets meant to him—the loss of the squirrel
"Bobtail" (which he "almost idolized") and later the ewe lamb (which he had
"perhaps" by gift of his father become the owner). Now, Brown indicates that
he had owned other animals, but apparently not completely. He is curiously
circumspect about explaining why: the ownership, he says, was incomplete
because "the title of minors" was "a little imperfect." Apparently, animals that
he thought he owned were taken away from him, on the grounds that he did
not have "title" to them as a minor. So John, being extremely strong-willed
despite his bashfulness, determinedly set out "to secure a more independent;
& perfect right of property." Significantly, this question of ownership ap-
ppears to have occurred more than once, for Brown noted that he devised
"various means" to deal with it.

What is happening here? Brown's evasive language makes the situation
difficult to reconstruct, but certain outlines emerge. The only logical person
who might repeatedly prevent John from obtaining full "title" to his pets was
his father, Owen. Why Owen objected is never stated, but several ideas sug-
gest themselves. Conceivably the elder Brown needed one of John's "pet"
sheep or cows to feed the family or to sell for income. Furthermore, in a
frontier settlement where unfenced woodlands merged with small farms,
wild or stray domestic animals might have roamed onto the Brown farm
from time to time. If young John Brown found them, he would likely have
claimed them as pets, only to discover that the animal was on father Owen's
land—and duly appropriated for food or income.

Whatever the specific situations, young Brown repeatedly attempted to
secure his property through one of two means. "One of those means was to
exchange with his Father for something of far less value." The implication is that in some cases Owen Brown allowed John to treat animals as pets if they were formally "purchased" from his father for a token fee ("something of far less value"). In such cases, Owen Brown acted kindly toward his son, though rigorously insisting that the formalities of "property" and "title" be observed. But on other occasions John apparently could not convince his father to spare such pets, for the letter indicates that another means of obtaining them "was by trading with others persons for something his Father had never owned." If Owen would not give him pets, John would be able to get them from more willing neighbors.

The conflict of ownership between father and son obviously left a strong imprint. More than forty years later, Brown still vividly remembered how Owen confiscated his pets, as well as the means he worked out to evade, his father's authority. Even more important, the evasive language in the passage demonstrates that Brown remained unable to acknowledge his anger openly. In effect, the paragraph reveals a concealed hostility that Brown was still carrying toward his father. The last sentence amounts to a condemnation, but the son could only express his anger indirectly, through use of a generality: "Older persons have some times found difficulty with titles."

Unconsciously, Brown may have been applying the last phrase to himself as well. For the crucial message of the passage is not Brown's hostility toward his father, but the issues through which the hostility is expressed, that is to say, title and ownership. Indeed, a psychoanalytic interpretation of Brown's childhood suggests that throughout his life, Brown never fully resolved the question of "titles" of his own identity. The more the letter is probed, the more it reveals an obsession with property and title. Brown continually describes himself as finding some piece of "property," forming strong attachments to it, and then losing it and severely mourning the loss.

What, after all, is the very first experience in Brown's life that he can recall? Before the age of four, John steals three brass pins, discovers that his title to them is imperfect, has them taken away, and is severely whipped. At six, John receives a treasured yellow marble, loses it, and mourns for "years." Soon afterward, John catches a squirrel, pulling its tail off in the process; then tames and idolizes it; then loses it and mourns another year or two. At eight, John loses another precious possession—his mother—and pines after her for years. Then comes the story of the lamb and, later, his conflicts with his father over the ownership of other pets. The religious moral drawn from these lessons ("a severe but much needed course of discipline") was that "the Heavenly Father sees it best to take all the little things out of his hands which he has ever placed in them." Clearly, the process of becoming an independent adult was for John Brown a continuing effort to reconcile his guilt and anger over losing property with his fierce desire to become truly independent, to possess clear title to his own pets, to become a "propreted" father like Owen and—dare we say it—even like God the father himself. Paradoxically, only when Brown internalized and accepted the authority of
John Brown, the kindly father:

Brown's daughter Ruth remembered the following incident from her childhood: "When I first began to go to school, I found a piece of calico one day behind one of the benches—it was not large, but seemed quite a treasure to me, and I did not show it to any one until I got home. Father heard me then telling about it, and said, 'Don't you know what girl lost it?' I told him I did not. 'Well, when you go to school tomorrow take it with you, and find out if you can who lost it. It is a trifling thing, but always remember that if you should lose anything you valued, no matter how small, you would want the person that found it to give it back to you.'"

his fathers could he then act the part of a stern, loving parent himself. Submission to his father's authority made it possible for him to accept as legitimate his authority over his own "pets."

The pattern of Brown's struggle for autonomy is reflected in the role he played as father to his own children. Owen Brown had been a stern disciplinarian, in part because he had felt the lack of a strong hand in his own childhood. John internalized and emulated this severe approach early on. When his younger brother, Salmon, had been pardoned for some misdeed by a boarding-school teacher, John went to the teacher and told him that "if Salmon had done this thing at home, father would have punished him. I know he would expect you to punish him now for doing this—and if you don't, I shall." When the schoolmaster persisted in his lenience, John was reported to have given Salmon a "severe flogging." As a parent, Brown's discipline was equally harsh. When his three-year-old son Jason claimed that a certain dream actually had occurred, Brown felt obliged to whip the boy for lying. The father's immense ambivalence in such a situation was evidenced by the tears that welled up in his eyes as he performed the whipping.

For Brown, even sins took on an aspect of property. The father kept a detailed account book of his son John Jr.'s transgressions, along with the number of whiplashes each sin deserved. Recalled the son:

On a certain Sunday morning he invited me to accompany him from the house to the tannery, saying that he had concluded it was time for a settlement. We
went into the upper or finishing room, and after a long and tearful talk over my faults, he again showed me my account, which exhibited a fearful footing up of debits... I then paid about one-third of the debt, reckoned in strokes from a nicely-prepared blue-beech switch, laid on "masterly." Then, to my utter astonishment, father stripped off his shirt, and, seating himself on a block, gave me the whip and bade me "lay it on" to his bare back. I dared not refuse to obey, but at first I did not strike hard. "Harder!" he said; "harder, harder!" until he received the balance of the account. Small drops of blood showed on his back where the tip end of the tingling beech cut through. Thus ended the account and settlement, which was also my first practical illustration of the Doctrine of Atonement.

In this astonishing tableau, Brown's personal conflicts are vividly reflected. The father punishes the son as justice demands, yet Brown also plays the wayward son himself. And as John Brown Jr. recognized only later, his father was consciously assuming the mantle of Christ, whom the heavenly Father had permitted humankind to crucify and punish, in order that other children's sins would be forgiven.

The upshot of such discipline was that Brown's sons harbored a similar ambivalence toward their father—an intense feeling of loyalty and submission countered by a strong desire for independence. The contradiction of such training became apparent to one of Brown's sons, Watson, during the raid on Harpers Ferry. "The trouble is," Watson remarked to his father, "you want your boys to be brave as tigers, and still afraid of you." "And that was perfectly true," agreed Salmon Brown, another son.

Psychoanalytic insight has thus helped to reveal some of John Brown's most intense personal conflicts: his ambivalence toward his father's strict discipline, the paradox of his struggle to internalize and accept his father's authority in order to become independent himself, and his excessive concern with property and "pets" as a means of defining his independence. Having exposed these themes, let us now return to the starting point of our original analysis of the letter—the anecdote about Brown and the young slave. Suddenly, what had seemed a straightforward tale is filled with immensely suggestive vocabulary, whose overtones reveal a great deal. The passage is worth reading once again:

During the war with England a circumstance occurred that in the end made him a most determined Abolitionist & led him to declare, or Swear: Eternal war with Slavery. He was staying for a short time with a very gentlemanly landlord since a United States Marshall who held a slave boy near his own age very active, intelligent and good feeling; & to whom John was under considerable obligation for numerous little acts of kindness. The master made a great pet of John: brought him to table with his first company; & friends; called their attention to every little smart thing he said or did; & to the fact of his being more than a hundred miles from home with a company of cattle alone; while the negro boy (who was fully if not more than his equal) was badly clothed, poorly fed; & lodged in cold weather; & beaten before his eyes with Iron Shovels or any other
John Brown, the stern father: Brown was influenced in his harsh discipline by his father, Owen (left), and in turn influenced his own son, John Jr. (right). Father John kept a detailed account book of young John’s sinful acts, along with the number of whiplashes each sin deserved. Even sins, it seemed, were carefully enumerated as property.

thing that came first to hand. This brought John to reflect on the wretched, hopeless condition, of Fatherless & Motherless slave children: for such children have neither Fathers or Mothers to protect, & provide for them. He sometimes would raise the question is God their Father?

Upon this second reading, it becomes evident that Brown’s language and metaphors here are full of references to parental relationships, dependence, and authority. John stayed with a “very gentlemanly landlord” who “made a great pet of John,” treating the boy just as John treated his own pets. At the same time, however, this gentlemanly father acted like no father at all to the negro boy, beating him unmercifully. This led John “to reflect on the wretched, hopeless condition, of Fatherless & Motherless slave children.” “Is God their Father?” he asked himself.

The situation confronted young Brown with two starkly contrasting models of a father, corresponding with the boy’s own ambivalent feelings toward Owen. Naturally, John wanted his own father to discipline him less harshly. He wanted to be treated as a “pet,” as his own animals were treated, as this gentleman treated him. Similarly, he identified with the negro boy, an innocent lad who was being punished just as Owen Brown sometimes punished John. Yet like all boys, he also identified with his own father. He desired as well as hated the power that Owen wielded over him and that this gentleman wielded over the negro boy. He thus felt the tug of two conflicting loyalties. To use the religious imagery so familiar to that age, John Brown wanted to grow up and act both as God the merciful Father and as God the righteous Judge.
This ambivalent father-son relationship suggests that Brown's intense lifelong identification with black slaves might well have sprung from the struggle he experienced with paternal discipline. Helping slaves was ultimately a means of helping himself without consciously recognizing the source of his emotions and convictions. He could channel the repressed hostility toward his father into a more acceptable form—hatred of the slaveholders, another class of paternalistic oppressors who cruelly whipped their charges. In attacking the planters, Brown relieved the sense of guilt he harbored for secretly wishing to destroy his father. After all, God the implacable Father and Judge was using Brown as his instrument for bringing justice to the world. At the same time, by protecting and defending the helpless slaves, Brown carried out God's will as a merciful father. In liberating the black nation, he could free himself. In some indirect yet significant way, the raid at Harpers Ferry involved the working out of psychological turmoil that had troubled Brown since childhood.

Does all this speculation lead us then to assume that childhood neuroses rather than moral conviction dictated Brown's actions? Few historians would go that far. A full explanation of any person's actions and beliefs must, in the end, be multicausal if it is to reflect the complexity of real life. We cannot minimize the sincerity—nor the nobility—of Brown's belief in the brotherhood of black people and white people. Yet the stirrings of deeply rooted unconscious forces can be neglected no more than the more rational components of behavior can.

This psychological interpretation, then, is not offered as definitive or exclusive. And our brief exposition of one letter constitutes only one small part of what should properly be a much larger analysis of Brown's personality and career. But the exposition is ample enough to suggest how fruitful a broadly psychoanalytical approach can be. As Michael Rogin suggested in the case of Andrew Jackson, psychohistory provides historians with a theory that sensitizes them to profitable themes, motifs, and vocabularies. An awareness of recurring tensions stemming from Brown's childhood makes it possible to appreciate how his personal sufferings incorporated the larger events of the period.

At the moment Brown transcended his life of failure, he forced his generation to identify either positively or negatively with the action he took to liberate black Americans. His act of violence was appropriate to what Oates described as "the violent, irrational, and paradoxical times in which he lived." Given Brown's profoundly religious nature and commitment to human liberty and equality, he could not be at peace until his society recognized the contradiction between its religious and political ideals and the existence of slavery.

In the end, John Brown turned the tables on society. His raid on Harpers Ferry pressed his fellow Americans to consider whether it was not actually their values, and society's, that were immoral and "abnormal." The outbreak of civil war, after all, demonstrated that American society was so maladjusted and so divided that it could not remain a "normal," integrated whole with-
out violently purging itself. If Brown's raid was an isolated act of a disturbed man, why did it drive an entire generation to the brink of war? Why did Brown's generation find it impossible to agree about the meaning of Harpers Ferry? As C. Vann Woodward concluded, the importance lay not so much in the man or event, but in the use made of them by northern and southern partisans. For every Emerson or Thoreau who pronounced the raid the work of a saint, a southern fire-eater condemned the venture as the villainy of all northerners.

None of these actors in the historical drama paid much attention to evidence. A crisis mentality thwarted any attempts at understanding or reconciliation. In the fury of mutual recrimination, both sides lost sight of the man who had provoked the public outcry and propelled the nation toward war. In such times it will always be, as abolitionist Wendell Phillips remarked, "hard to tell who's mad."