

John Brown Chapter 1-3 Notes

Chronology

This is a timeline of events.

The book is not really organized chronologically. The first chapters got all the way to from 1800 to the early 1840s, but don't include all the events in his life.

Instead, the chapters are thematic, so there's some overlap.

Chapter 1

Each chapter starts with a quote from the Bible, and it kind of explains DuBois' theme.

This first verse is from Matthew 2:15, "That it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet saying, 'Out of Egypt have I called My son.'". It's the story of the Magi and King Herod.

Joseph is fleeing to Egypt and hiding out. Then, after Herod dies Joseph and his family leave Egypt and go to Nazareth.

"The mystic spell of Africa is and ever was over all America." The chapter is about the relationship between Africans and Americans. The main inspiration America owes to Africa was the call to heroism of the abolition movement!

"The Negroes came on the heels, if not on the very ships of Columbus." Africans were here before immigrants.

"These black men came not of their willing, but because of the hasty greed of new America"

"So with the birth of wealth and liberty..., came slavery, and slavery all the more cruel and hideous because it gradually built itself on a caste of race and color, thus breaking the common bonds of human fellowship...."

"Their color became a badge of servitude, ...; many of their virtues became vices, and much of their vice, virtue." "The price of repression is greater than the cost of liberty. The degradation of men costs something both to the degraded and those who degrade."

He talks about the elements of America: “Puritanism... vigor and thrift of the Renaissance... passionate desire for personal freedom.” And these are the themes DuBois uses to describe John Brown.

DuBois then lists Brown’s lineage, like in the Bible, and then notes that his father, Owen Brown, had a stammer that would only stop when he was in prayer.

The final words about John Brown: “John was born, one hundred years after his great-grandfather. Nothing else very uncommon.”

So, Chapter 1 – it’s got some history of Africa and the US, and the theme is this corrupted relationship between them, and their people, and what America stands for.

Chapter 2

“There was a man called of God and his name was John.” John 1:6. This is the introductory part of the book of John, and it says John was sent by God, and he was a witness to the light.

This chapter is about John Brown’s childhood, and what he sees, and how it affects him, shaping his morality.

He became “a rambler in the wild new country, finding birds and squirrels and sometimes a wild turkey’s nest.” At first, the Indians filled him with a strange fear. But his kindly old father thought of Indians as neither vermin nor property and this fear “soon wore off and he used to hang about them
“He could dress leather and make whip-lashes; he could herd cattle and talk Indian; but of books and formal schooling he had little.”

“By the time he was twelve years old he was sent off more than a hundred miles with companies of cattle.” So his soul grew apart and alone and yet untrammelled and unconfined, knowing all the depths of secret self-abasement, and the heights of confident self-will.” - he was moody, maybe self-hating, but also confident.

His family were religious Calvinists. John Brown, however, was skeptical, and he didn't like the doctrines of his day.

He became devoted to studying the Bible.

He experienced the war of 1812, and part of the fighting was in Ohio. John Brown came to be disgusted with war.

Chapter ends with a story, during the war, a landlord invites him to stay. He meets the landlord's slave boy.

"Fellow souls were scarce with this backwoodsman and his diffidence warmed to the kindly welcome of the stranger, especially because he was black, half-naked, and wretched. In John's very ears the kind voices of the master and his folk turned to harsh abuse with this black boy. At night the slave lay in the bitter cold and once they beat the wretched thing before John's very eyes with an iron shovel, and again and again struck him with any weapon that chanced. In wide-eyed silence John looked on and questioned, Was the boy bad or stupid? No, he was active, intelligent and with the great warm sympathy of his race did the stranger "numerous little acts of kindness," so that John readily, in his straightforward candor, acknowledged him "fully if not more than his equal.""

"this was to the half-grown man a thing of fearful portent and he asked, "Is God their Father?" And what he asked, a million and a half black bondmen were asking through the land."

So, it ends with this great sense of moral doubt about slavery.

Chapter 3

"Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation." Peter 3:4 People are doubting the coming of Jesus. Peter goes on to explain that it'll come all of a sudden.

This chapter is about his years from around 20 to 40 years old. The Wanderjare is German for Journeyman Years, and it's a time when the apprentice is sent out into the world to discover him or herself.

Brown didn't do well in school, or at least it wasn't going to work out for him.

At age 20 he marries Dianthe Lusk.

Brown has an unfocused career path, doing a bunch of different businesses, but usually doing OK.

Brown had a big family. Loved his children, but was a disciplinarian. His son John Jr. was lazy and punished for it. Then you have this scene where he whips his son. stops, and then orders Jr. to whip him. He also whipped his other kids.

He was a stickler for honesty.

So, to contrast with this, DuBois also writes about how he was a natural born nurse, attending to his father, to his wife, and to his dying child.

His first wife, Dianthe, passed away in childbirth. She had 7 children, and 2 had died young.

He married his second wife, Mary Ann Day, a year later, and she was only 17 years old. She would go on to have 13 children, with 7 dying young. This is a total of 11 surviving children.

As he aged, he became more austere: "severely clean, sparing in his food so far as to count butter an unnecessary luxury; once a moderate user of cider and wine—then a strong teetotaler; a lover of horses with harassing scruples as to breeding race-horses."

He had some books, "But above all others the Bible was his favorite volume and he had such perfect knowledge of it that when any person was reading he would correct the least mistake."

Into John Brown's religious life entered two strong elements; the sense of overruling inexorable fate, and the mystery and promise of death.

DuBois then goes on to present Brown as religious and detached from the world, but suffering repeatedly from the deaths of his children.

He has all these regrets. He's not kind enough to those he loves. He's not able to move friends toward God. He was especially worrying about his children's lack of religious faith.

He also seems to hear the voice of his late wife Dianthe. (I wonder if this is an auditory hallucination.)

But, all this psychological and intellectual stuff was suppressed under his work and thrift, though it also came out. Fred Douglass: "Certainly I never felt myself in the presence of a stronger religious influence than while in this man's house."

The chapter ends with John Brown in middle age, in his forties, having a growing personal crisis.