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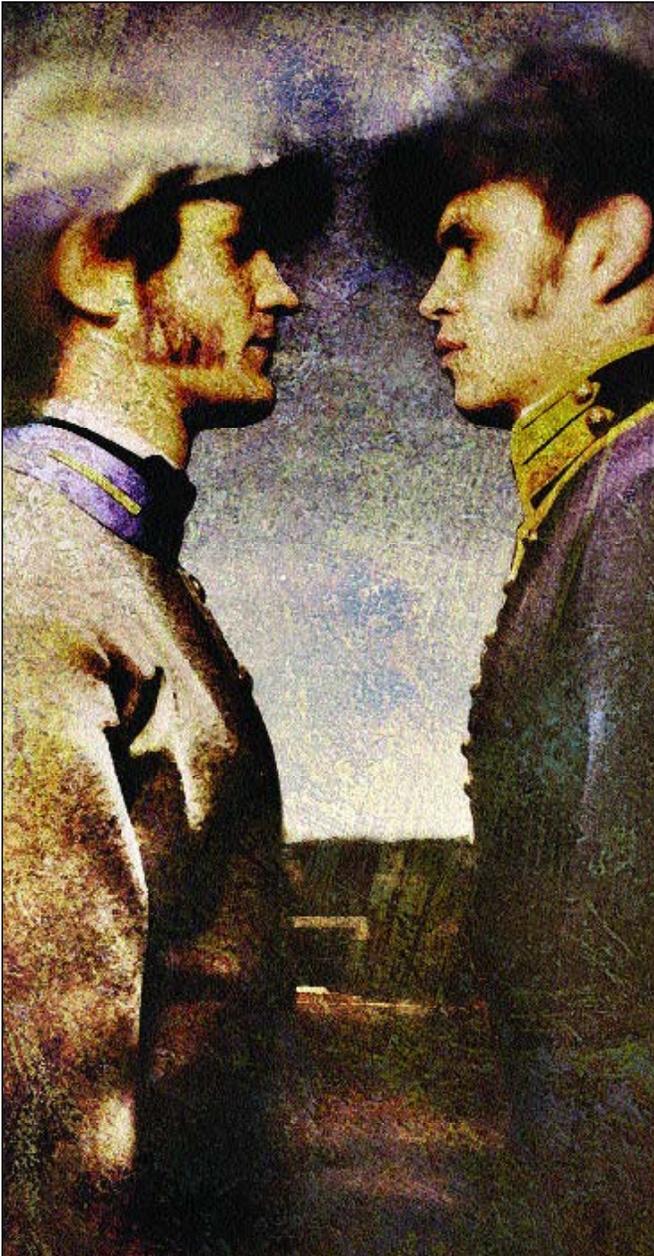


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JOHN BROWN'S BODY

Jan. 29 - Feb. 28 • The Stage Theatre

Written as a long narrative poem about the American Civil War, Stephen Vincent Benét uses the slavery issue and the abolitionist John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry as the theme that unites the aspects of American life in the troubled 1860's. The events and effects of the war are seen through the eyes of Jack Ellyat, the New England intellectual, and Clay Wingate, the dashing Southern romanticist. Their families, backgrounds, battle experiences and romances, accented by music of the period, are highlighted. Fiction is actualized with the presence of historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln, Generals Robert E. Lee, Ulysses S. Grant, Stonewall Jackson, Philip Sheridan, and William Sherman, among others. In this adaptation we can see the strength of this epic as uniquely American in its qualities and themes.

"It is over now, but they will not let it be over."

John Brown's Body, Book 8,
"The Arms Are Stacked"

"John Brown's body lies amoldering in the grave.
You will not come again with foolish pikes
And a pack of desperate boys to shadow
the sun
John Brown's body lies amoldering in the
grave."

John Brown's Body,
adaptation



The Author

"I am tired, not of criticism of America, for no country can be healthy without self-criticism, but of the small railers, conventional rebels. We also have a heritage."¹

Stephen Vincent Benét in a letter to John C. Farrar, publisher, 1927.

Stephen Vincent Benét was born on July 22, 1898, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, the third child and second son of Captain James Walker Benét and Frances Neill Rose Benét. But military families do not remain long in any one place; consequently, young Benét spent most of his early life in on military posts including California and Georgia. In Augusta, Georgia he attended the Summerville Academy to prepare for college.

In 1915, Benét entered Yale and almost immediately became a literary star. By the age of 17, he had already published one volume of verse, *Five Men and Pompey*. Since other members of the family had distinguished themselves in the literary world – brother William Rose and sister Laura were both poets and critics – it was expected that Stephen would exhibit a writing talent. The young man would not disappoint them. While at Yale, he won the John Masefield poetry prize for his poem "Music" and the Albert Stanburrough Cook prize for "The Drug Shop," a sympathetic interpretation of the poet John Keats. He wrote plays and acted in them, was elected to the editorial board of the *Yale Record* and later, to the chairmanship of the *Yale Literary Magazine*.

Stephen's first significant poetic work, *Young Adventure*, appeared in 1918, a year before his graduation, followed in 1925 by another collection of poetry, *Tiger Joy*. In the meantime, he published his first novel, *Beginning in Wisdom* in 1921, went to France, studied at the Sorbonne and married Rosemary Carr. In 1926 he published *Spanish Bayonet*, an historical novel of Florida.

A Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Grant given to Benét in 1926 made it possible for him to write *John Brown's Body*, an epic of the Civil War. All the writing was done in France. While other American writers, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and

Ernest Hemingway, disparaged America, Benét extolled its merits. As the work progressed, the family expanded by three children and they all returned to America in 1928. In 1929 *John Brown's Body* received the Pulitzer Prize and in 1933 it was awarded the Roosevelt medal. Meanwhile, Benét continued to write novels (*James Shore's Daughter*); *A Book of Americans*, co-written with his wife; screenplays (*Abraham Lincoln* for D. W. Griffith); reviews for the *New York Herald Tribune* and *Saturday Review of Literature*, and numerous short stories including "The Devil and Daniel Webster" which won the O. Henry prize for best short story of 1936.

In 1939, "The Devil and Daniel Webster" became an opera with music by Douglas Moore and libretto by Benét. During rehearsals Benét was hospitalized for nervous exhaustion caused by overwork. Having lost most of his savings in the 1929 crash, Benét wrote poems, stories and reviews to support his family.

In 1943, at the age of 45, he died of a heart attack in his beloved Rosemary's arms. A year later his unfinished work, *Western Star*, was awarded a Pulitzer Prize. In this verse epic Benét dealt with the settling of America and the Westward expansion.

"Living abroad has intensified my Americanism."²

Themes and IMAGERY in JOHN BROWN'S BODY

"Poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature of universals, whereas those of history are singular."

Aristotle, *Poetics*, Chapter 9

In his foreword to *John Brown's Body*, Benét wrote that he did not think of the work as a poem about the war itself. "What I was trying to do was to show certain realities, legends, ideas, landscapes, ways of living, faces of men that were ours that did not belong to any other country."¹ Both the complete poem and this adaptation make no attempt at a full treatment of the Civil War.

The structure of the poem is eight loosely woven books with a "structural fluidity of a musical composition" linked together with integrating elements.² The first of these is John Brown, his raid on Harper's Ferry and its effect on public opinion. His historical significance is reiterated in the repetition of the song and the reference to his bones as the genesis of cities. A second major unifying element is the fictional characters that represent the main regional divisions of the country. Jack Ellyat is the Connecticut boy of the Northeast who enlists in the Union Army while his Southern counterpart is Clay Wingate of Georgia who fights for the Confederacy. Melora Vilas and her father represent the Border states and the West. Characters such as Luke Breckinridge, Charles Bailey and Jack Diefer communicate other attitudes such as ignorance of the enemy and/or no belief in the cause for which they're fighting. Cudjo, Aunt Bess, Jeb and Sarie are the loyal slaves of the Wingates who display "a graciousness founded on a hopeless wrong."³

Another unity is achieved by the choice of poetic style. Blank verse is employed for serious episodes such as the soliloquies of Lincoln, description of battles, and the mood of the intransigent North. The heroic couplets used in the Wingate episodes

suggest the gallantry, the dancing and the horse galloping of the antebellum South. The presence of strong female characters (Mary Lou, Sally Dupree) also emphasize the feminine aspect of the prewar South. What Benét called the "long rough line"⁴ comes closest to the rhythm of ordinary speech and is used by a number of characters.

Another strength of the poem is the imagery. John Brown is compared to a stone; his tears are those of a "squeezed stone;" "a stone eroded to a cutting edge." His counterpart in strength is Robert E. Lee, "the marble man" who is defeated by the "rocky ridges" of Gettysburg. In contrast to the stone is the seed, which is referred to by the Captain of the ship as part of the plan to breed slaves. In a more poetic vein, the young soldiers are compared to the corn that will be ground down; the idea that slavery must be abolished is a "slow root growing," while the birth of Melora's baby and the new age of industry are alternated. Finally, John Brown's bones become the seeds for the new age.

Benét's view of the Civil War was the moderation of Abraham Lincoln, Carl Sandburg and Walt Whitman – that the Union must be preserved from the rebellions of the South and the fanatical abolitionists of the North. But why was the preservation of the Union so important? The poem offers no explicit answer, but might be found in an interview Benét gave in 1930. "My sense of the union is of two majestic and continuing phases, the preservation of the Union and the continual restless movement of its people."⁵

Significant BATTLES of the CIVIL WAR

"This is a rich man's war and a poor man's fight."
Adaptation

The Civil War began on April 12, 1861 when Confederate forces under General Pierre G.T. Beauregard successfully attacked Ft. Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina harbor. The Northern forces under the command of General Anderson were forced to retreat and the United States flag was replaced by the Confederate one.

In July, Union General Irwin McDowell approached Manassas, Virginia on the Bull Run creek. McDowell thought his troops could destroy the Confederate forces under Beauregard. But another Confederate commander, Joseph E. Johnston, marched his troops from the Shenandoah Valley to join with Beauregard. The two armies, composed mainly of poorly trained volunteers, clashed on July 21. With Washington, D.C. politicians as an audience, the Union forces were overwhelmed and all involved fled to the city in wild retreat. The North realized for the first time that it faced a long and bloody battle. After Bull Run, Lincoln made General George B. McClellan commander of the eastern army known as the Army of the Potomac and the General began plans to attack Richmond.

The South hoped to gain foreign recognition for its cause by winning a victory in Union territory. General Robert E. Lee and the Army of Virginia invaded Maryland in September, 1862 with about 50,000 troops. The Southern commander divided his army and sent Stonewall Jackson and his battalion to capture Harper's Ferry. By chance a Union soldier found a copy of Lee's orders to his commanders wrapped around three cigars at an abandoned Confederate camp. When Lee learned this news, he took a position at Sharpsburg on Antietam Creek. But McClellan, Union commander, delayed five days before attacking which allowed the Confederate army to reunite. The Union Army almost cracked the Southern lines, but the reunified Southern forces held the day. However, Lee suffered heavy losses and was

forced to retreat to Virginia. One of the bloodiest battles of the war, Antietam killed or wounded 12,500 Northerners and almost 11,000 Southerners. However, the retreat gave Lincoln the victory he had waited for and the opportunity to announce the Emancipation Proclamation.

On July 1, 1863 President Lincoln declared all slaves free residing in territories in rebellion against the federal government, but it actually freed very few people. It did not apply to slaves in border-states fighting on the Union side, nor did it affect slaves in southern areas already under Union control. Naturally, the states in rebellion did not act on Lincoln's order. The president had been reluctant to come to this position. Lincoln initially viewed the war only in terms of preserving the Union. But as pressure for abolition mounted in Congress and the country, Lincoln became more sympathetic to the idea. Although the Emancipation Proclamation did not end slavery in America (the 13th Amendment accomplished that), it did make abolition a basic war goal.

The siege of Vicksburg (1862-63) was led by Union General Ulysses Grant who tried to capture this key city that guarded the Mississippi River between Memphis and New Orleans. When direct attacks failed, Grant bombarded the city, scattering Confederate troops and forcing the inhabitants of the city to live in caves and eat mule meat. After six weeks the city surrendered.

Lee, confident because of the victory at Chancellorsville, decided to invade the North again. The Confederate army swung up the Shenandoah Valley into Pennsylvania, followed by the Army of the Potomac now led by General George Meade. The site was Gettysburg. Neither army planned to fight there, but a Confederate brigade in need of shoes ran into Union cavalry and attacked. On the first day the two armies maneuvered for position; the Union forces occupied a three-mile front along Cemetery Ridge that ended at two hills, Little Round Top and Round Top. Confederate forces occupied Seminary Ridge to the west. On July 3, Lee decided to aim directly at the Union center. Under General George Pickett,

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the Southern men, marching in perfect parade formation, marched up the Ridge, only to be cut down by Union fire. This battle showed the futility of frontal assaults and deprived Lee's army of mounting further offensives.

The burning of Atlanta is alluded to when the Wingate mansion catches fire. When General Sherman captured Atlanta, he secured the railroad lines. But Confederate forces began hit and run raids on Sherman's railroad connections to Chattanooga. Thinking it useless to pursue these perpetrators, Sherman left Atlanta in flames on November 15, 1864 and set out for Savannah. His 60,000 men brought a new kind of war to the South as they destroyed civilian property and laid waste to everything that might help the South continue fighting.

"War does not determine
who is right – only who is left."
Anonymous

Causes of the WAR

“The American Civil War was a struggle for American nationality. It was less a war between states than a war between two nations, two economic structures and two ways of life.” So writes historian Bert James Loewenberg in his introduction to *John Brown's Body*. The South wanted to anchor society in the past, to stem the tide of change and to uphold an aristocratic regionalism against the claims for national unity. While the North was not so certain of its historic mission, it knew it was bound to the future by ties of money and commerce. It was a contest between a rural, individualistic civilization on one hand and an industrial urban society on the other.

Historians never have reached a general agreement about the causes of the Civil War, but they do concur that the nation was “a house divided – half slave and half free.” Actually, the United States had three sections: the Northeast, the South and the West. Each section had a different type of economy: industry and finance dominated the Northeast; the farming of cotton, tobacco and sugar, mainly for export to Europe, was the basis of Southern economy, while the West grew a great variety of crops that they sold to the Northeast. Thus, the Northeast and the West had common interests and a natural trade relationship; they also

believed in an expanding economy and progressive ideas of expansion. The South was more conservative and “Old Worldly” with a peculiar way of life that made it different from the rest of the nation – slavery. Though fewer than ten of every one hundred Southern white men owned slaves, most Southerners favored the system.

During the 1850s there was continuous bickering between sections of the country over demands for special legislation. The Northeast wanted a protective tariff for its industrial products, while the West sought free farms for settlers and federal aid for roads and other improvements. Southerners resisted measures that would strengthen the federal government and opposed many demands of other sections, believing in the right of states to govern themselves. Basically, the South wanted to be left alone.

All the various demands were mixed up with the slavery issue. Anti-slavery forces lobbied Congress to keep slavery out of the expanding territories, but the South replied that slavery could not be barred from land that belonged to the whole nation. Leaders in Congress tried in vain to settle the issue by a series of compromises including the Missouri Compromise and the Compromise of 1850. But the laws were weak and the rapid orga-

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nization of new territories kept pushing the issue until Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. The measure proposed to settle the slavery question by letting a particular territorial legislature decide whether the area should have slavery or not. Public opinion in the North ran against the bill and the Whig party splintered over the question – to reemerge as the Republican Party. Meanwhile, opponents and supporters of slavery poured into the new territories and clashed in armed conflict over their beliefs.

In addition, the South felt it was the economic appendage of the North, for they purchased their farm machinery, luxuries and some necessities from the region. Belatedly, the South realized they would have to diversify their economy to attract foreign investment. But cotton was king and the pressures to produce it were great. Thus, the South wanted a greater say in the expanding sections so that they could grow more cotton with slave labor.

Frustrated by Northern rules that prevented their cause, the South became more belligerent and emotional. “Emotion generated emotion just as irrational conduct called for irrational responses.”¹ Therefore, John Brown and his raid became a symbol of irrational and misguided fervor. But, in the sense of folklore, he is a symbol of a fighting faith in freedom and the strength of the human spirit.

“In every heart
Are sown the sparks
that kindle fiery war.”

William Cowper: *The Task V.*

The Participants in the WAR

THE UNION

Abraham Lincoln, president and commander-in-chief of the following states:

Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Kentucky, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, Oregon, California.

Military leadership: Generals George McClellan, Ambrose Burnside, Joseph Hooker, George G. Meade, Henry Halleck, Ulysses S. Grant, William T. Sherman, Philip H. Sheridan, George H. Thomas.

THE CONFEDERACY

Jefferson Davis, president and leader of the following states:

Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas.

Military leadership: Generals Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, James Longstreet, Albert Sidney Johnston, Pierre G. T. Beauregard, Braxton Bragg, Joseph E. Johnston.

Other NAMES, PLACES & TERMS

Emerson and Thoreau – Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) were philosophers and writers.

Nat Turner – led an uprising of slaves in 1831 that alarmed pro-slavery groups and resulted in more restrictions upon slaves.

William H. Seward – Secretary of State in Lincoln’s cabinet.

Salmon P. Chase – Secretary of the Treasury under Lincoln.

Horace Greeley – founder and editor of the *New York Herald Tribune* who urged Lincoln to settle the Civil War by compromise.

Andersonville Prison – a prison in southwestern Georgia where 30,000 Northern prisoners were confined in a 16-acre log stockade with miserable sanitary conditions and little food. Its overseer was Captain Henry Wirz.

ACTIVITIES

Colorado Model Content Standards for History. Students understand the chronological organization of history and know how to organize events and people into major eras to identify and explain historical relationships. Students understand that societies are diverse and have changed over time. Students understand political institutions and theories that have developed and changed over time.

1. Research the “Triangle Trade,” the “Middle Passage” and conditions on slave ships.
2. Write an evaluation of John Brown that is either a defense or an indictment.
3. Research famous remarks of the Civil War; who said them and when.
4. Research songs and marches of both sides in the Civil War. Titles might include “Dixie”, “Rally Round the Flag”, “Battle Hymn of the Republic”, “John Brown’s Body”, etc.
5. Research and discuss spirituals.

6. Find works by Walt Whitman that describes John Brown’s trial.
7. Research prisoner of war camps on both sides.
8. Research information on Lincoln’s cabinet members as well as those of Jefferson Davis.
9. What are the characteristics of *John Brown’s Body* that make it an epic? What other epics have you read?
10. If the framers of the Constitution had dealt firmly and honestly with the slavery issue, would there have been a Civil War? Why or why not?

Bibliography

<p>pg. 2</p> <p>N O T E S & S O U R C E S</p>	<p>pg. 4 & 5</p> <p>S O U R C E S</p>
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