Study questions for *Confessions of Nat Turner*

These study questions are intended to encourage you to think about the readings carefully and to help you to prepare for in-class discussion and for your papers (the second writing assignment may or may not be on this book). I recommend that you examine the study questions before reading the text, and that you keep the study questions at hand while reading. You are not expected to turn in written answers to the study questions.

**November 7:** We will focus on the Introduction and the *Confessions* document. Be sure you have a good understanding of 1) the basic events of the rebellion, 2) how the *Confessions* came about, 3) what difficulties are involved in using it as historical evidence, and 4) how Greenberg situates the document and the rebellion in the longer history of slavery.

**November 14:** We will consider the different reactions to the rebellion as exemplified in the “Related documents” section, especially the newspaper accounts (docs 1 through 7) and Thomas Dew’s piece on abolition (doc 14). Be prepared to compare and contrast these documents and to put them in the context of the lectures on American Slaveries I & II (Nov 10 and Nov 12). In addition, give serious thought to study questions 35 and 36 below.

The Introduction

1. Who was Nat Turner? What was unusual about him?

2. Why is it important to understand the economic and demographic characteristics of Southampton County? How do they impact our analysis of the Nat Turner Rebellion?

3. How did *Confessions of Nat Turner* (the original, not this book) come about?

4. Who was Thomas R. Gray? What do we know about him?

5. Why is it important to think about the above two questions in analyzing the *Confessions*?

6. What is left out of the Confessions? How does Greenberg explain these “silences”?

7. What does Greenberg say about the context of Nat Turner’s Rebellion? What possible contexts does Greenberg offer? Why is it important to be careful when choosing in what context one should put the rebellion (or any other historical event, for that matter)?
8. What was the importance of “mercy” in the trials of the rebels?

9. Does Greenberg see the Nat Turner Rebellion as a turning point in Southern history? Why or why not?

10. In what ways has Nat Turner’s story lived on in the popular historical imagination? What factors have colored its retelling in different times or different contexts?

The Confession

11. In his “To The Public,” what kinds of words does Gray use to describe the rebels? What do these words say about his attitude toward Turner? Do they say anything about the potential reliability of the confession itself?

12. What reasons does Gray give for publishing Nat Turner’s confession?

13. What kinds of things convinced Nat Turner that he was destined for something special? How did he conclude that that something had to do with slavery and rebellion?

14. Has Nat Turner changed his mind about the rebellion? What evidence do you have for answering this question?

15. As you read the description of the rebellion in the confession, keep in mind what Greenberg said in the introduction about the confession’s choice of wording. Are you inclined to agree with Greenberg’s suspicions? Why or why not?

16. How does Nat Turner describe his decision to kill everyone, no matter age or sex? How does Greenberg explain it? What motives could there be for such a course of action? (What explanations do the newspaper accounts and other documents later in the book offer or imply?)

17. Are there contradictions in Gray’s comments on Nat Turner? How might you explain them? How does Greenberg explain them?

Related documents

18. Compare the reports in The Richmond Compiler (doc 1) and The Constitutional Whig (doc 2). Do they differ in tone? How does each explain the causes of the rebellion? Is there anything in either document that contradicts or calls to question their explicit explanation of the causes?

19. How is the explanation of the causes of the rebellion offered in The Liberator (doc 4) different from those offered in docs 1 and 2? Why?
20. In what ways does *The Liberator* (doc 4) use the rebellion as an argument for abolition?

21. According to Pleasants (doc 5), what is the danger that results from exaggerating (or perhaps even reporting) the horrors that took place in Southampton?

22. Compare the accounts of black and white violence in Pleasants’ account in *The Constitutional Whig* (doc 5).

23. Why does the writer of the letter to *The Constitutional Whig* (doc 7) consider a slave rebellion unlikely or even impossible? What does he think of the work of “philanthropists” concerned with slaves?

24. What reasons might the writer of the letter in *The Constitutional Whig* (doc 7) have for noting the loyalty of many slaves to their masters and to whites in general during and after the rebellion?

25. In the introduction to the trial transcripts (doc 10), the editors note that VA governor John Floyd was concerned that the trials should be fair (p. 91). Why do you think he was concerned about that? On the basis of the transcripts (admittedly partial), how fair do you think the trials were?

26. On p. 98 and again on p. 101 (doc 11) the court made reference to the need to have sufficient troops to guard the prisoners as they were being held in jail. What do you think the court is worried about?

27. When a prisoner is found guilty, the court notes what their dollar value is. Why would the court do that?

28. Note the reference in Governor Floyd’s diary (doc 12) to *The Liberator*, and the references to Northerners and religion in Floyd’s letter to the governor of South Carolina (doc 13). What does Floyd say about Northerners and *The Liberator*? How do you think the newspaper or the Northerners would respond?

29. What is Dew’s (doc 14) explanation of why the Virginia legislature began to consider gradual abolition schemes?

30. Did Dew (doc 14) think that discussing the abolition of slavery in the legislature was a good idea? Why or why not?

31. What objections does Dew (doc 14) offer to emancipation?

32. What references to African American religion do you find in these documents? In what light are black preachers and black religiosity presented?
Mulling over the material

33. Consider the contemporaries of Nat Turner. What different groups of people could have been interested in the story of the rebellion? How might these groups have interpreted the rebellion differently, and why? How much information about these questions do you find in the documents?

34. While keeping in mind Greenberg’s warnings about the significance of choosing contexts, put Nat Turner’s Rebellion and the Confessions in the context of what you know about U.S. history in the first half of the 19th century. What developments prior to the rebellion would be important to consider? What developments after it would be relevant?

35. Think about the violence surrounding the rebellion. How do the various documents presented here portray violence in connection with the rebellion? What factors color our understanding of it? What is obvious, what is easy to overlook? Do the answers to these questions say anything more broadly about the history of violence, or about how violence is portrayed in historical writing (or in contemporary journalism, for that matter)?

36. Think about the views of slavery that emerge in the Confession and in the related documents. Is there anything here that surprises you? What judgments (including implied ones) do you find here about the morality of slavery? How would you set these views in the context of the rise of abolitionism and the Southern defense of slavery in the period between the rebellion and the Civil War?

37. Nat Turner’s Rebellion and its various historical retellings raise important questions about the nature of historical scholarship and historical memory. What shapes how we remember events? For instance, what kinds of events stand out as important and why? How are historical events celebrated or excoriated by different groups or in different times, and why? Is there a “real” story of the past?

38. We have encountered the problem of historical interpretation in Escaping Salem, in Confessions, and—perhaps less directly—in Attitudes toward Sex in Antebellum America. What constraints shape how historians do their work? How have the historians responsible for these three works tried to grapple with those constraints?