

The Birth of a Nation



Discussion Guide

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About

The Film

Set against the antebellum South, *The Birth of a Nation* follows Nat Turner (Nate Parker), a literate slave and preacher, whose financially strained owner, Samuel Turner (Armie Hammer), accepts an offer to use Nat's preaching to subdue unruly slaves. As he witnesses countless atrocities—against himself and his fellow slaves—Nat orchestrates an uprising in the hopes of leading his people to freedom. The film won the Audience Award and Grand Jury Prize in the U.S. Dramatic Competition at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival.

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The History

Slavery in the American south was ubiquitous, its insidious tendrils pervading every aspect of society. In this culture, slaves were denied all basic human rights: adequate food, clothing, and shelter, access to medical care, and education. As slaves they were very often separated from their parents as young children, forcing both children and parents to relinquish those essential relationships. They were denied freedom of movement and were unable to travel—even short distances—without papers from their owners.

African slaves were denied their history, their language, their culture—even their names were taken from them. They were not allowed to read or write. And yet, even in these unimaginable circumstances, and in the face of the ultimate dehumanization, slaves found ways to connect with and celebrate their own humanity, to organize, resist, and even rebel.

About

The History (con't.)

Resistance took many forms, such as subversive art, religious ritual, music, and learning to read and write in secret. It took the form of individual acts of sabotage, such as faking illness or injury, arson, vandalism, and even escaping to the free North. In addition to these more subtle forms of resistance and without the ability to organize and communicate—and without access to weapons, supplies, or allies—there were a number of slave uprisings and rebellions wherein groups of slaves banded together to physically fight back against their violent oppressors. Perhaps the most famous of these was the uprising led by Nat Turner.

The story of Nat Turner is a complex one. Not much is known of the man, and the accuracy of the one document purporting to be his “confession” has been questioned, as it was written by a white lawyer who claims that the words he wrote are Turner’s. This lawyer, Thomas Gray, published this account in 1831 as *The Confessions of Nat Turner, The Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, VA*. And while some accounts present him as a religious zealot or a fanatical vigilante, his legacy in the American collective memory, and history, is important and clear.

This is a man who, in the darkest of circumstances with access to absolutely no resources, took hold of his own destiny and inspired others to do so as well. Together, he and his followers fought back against oppressors who were the architects of the most incomprehensible atrocities and, by doing so, they reclaimed their humanity and paved a path for future generations to do the same. In this way, Nat Turner can be seen as the first black revolutionary—a forefather to Malcolm X, the Black Panthers, and the influential Black Power movement.

Guidelines for Viewing

In the Theater

Filmmaker Nate Parker has said about his film, “All I want is for this film to create change agents. I want us to walk in, see the film, and then, if we are so affected, walk out and try to affect our own environment in a way that eliminates injustice. If enough of us do it, then we’re addressing change; we’re addressing inequity on a mass level, a global level.” You can become a ‘change agent’ by organizing a group to go to the theater to see *The Birth of A Nation*. Go as a family, or bring your colleagues and friends together to view the film, talk about the issues and feelings it raises, and develop an action plan to turn those responses into qualitative change in your community. Below is a step-by-step guide to help you plan a thoughtful and productive trip to the theater with your family and friends to see *The Birth of a Nation*.

Before You Arrive at the Theater

The Birth of A Nation is a powerful and thought-provoking film. Make sure you have time before and after the film starts to talk with your companions about your experience.

Create a Safe Viewing Space

The Birth of a Nation is a film that deals with a very emotional and difficult subject and in order to create the most productive outcome, viewers need to feel safe expressing their feelings and responses. The most important thing is to ensure that everyone in your party feels welcome and safe, so that they are open to viewing—and discussing—this crucial content. Particularly if you’re bringing your kids, it is important to prepare them ahead of time for what they’ll be seeing, and how it might affect them. Refer to the *Things to Consider Before Watching The Birth of a Nation* section of this guide for topics and questions to help frame the viewing experience and to help navigate both the film and responses to it.

Check in With Yourself and Your Companions Before the Film Rolls

This film’s subject matter is an important and often overlooked aspect of our country’s history. Seeing it on the big screen with family and friends is a great way to start a dialogue about this emotionally charged and extremely topical story. When viewing in a theater, try to pay attention to the details that add emotional tenor to the story: e.g., the use of scripture, the music, the lighting, and the visual point of view. Also pay attention to your own physiological responses. Oftentimes our deepest insights come when we can focus on our own, personal, holistic, and emotional experiences of the story.

Guidelines for Viewing

In the Theater (con't.)

What aspects of the film make you most uncomfortable? Don't turn away from these moments; rather, observe how the images, ideas, conversations, and characters affect your own sense of anger, fear, wellbeing, anxiety, and calm. As much as you can, while still being present, make note of these details, so you can discuss them with your companions after the film ends.

Consider Timing

The film itself is just about 2 hours and, in order to really unpack all the issues the film raises, you should allow for a minimum of 45 to 60 minutes after the film to debrief with your friends and family. Consider inviting everyone back to your home for snacks and to talk. Or walk to a nearby café, where you can sit with a cup of coffee or tea and chat. Prior to your evening, you might refer to the *Things to Consider After Watching The Birth of a Nation* and the *Questions for Further Discussion* sections of this guide for questions and topics that can help start a fruitful dialogue.

Follow up

Particularly for younger viewers, this film will likely bring up a lot of questions and feelings, many of which will not get resolved the night of your outing. Make time in the coming weeks to revisit the conversation. Maintain that safe space, and encourage your friends and family to continue the discussion, dialogue, and thinking. Think about the ways that you will continue to work towards the ideals and goals the film brought up—even after the movie ends. Refer to the Extension Activities section of this guide for ways to get involved.

At Home

In addition to seeing the film in the theater, now that it's out on DVD and VOD, you can become a 'change agent' by hosting a house party viewing. Bring your friends and neighbors together to view the film, talk about the issues and feelings it raises, and develop an action plan to turn those responses into qualitative change in your community. Below is a step-by-step guide to help you plan your own house party viewing of *The Birth of a Nation*.

Guidelines for Viewing

At Home (con't.)

Pick the Tone

Your house party can be anything you wish—from brunch-and-a-movie on a Sunday to a get-together for your office staff to a small gathering at your house of worship. It can be a call to action for your neighbors or an educational opportunity that can start a meaningful conversation. Be creative, and don't be afraid to customize your approach. The most important thing is to create an environment that feels welcoming and safe, so that participants are open to viewing—and discussing—this crucial content.

Consider Timing and Agenda

This film can be used in a variety of settings, depending on your own needs and restrictions. Time is one of the most important considerations. The film itself is just about 2 hours and, for an effective event, you need to add at least 15 minutes before the film to set the tone and a minimum of 45 to 60 minutes after the film for a follow-up discussion and dialogue. To assist with the post-film discussion, you might consider inviting a moderator or assembling a panel of local experts or stakeholders, such as diversity mediation experts, religious leaders, or educators. You might also consider a series of two or three evenings, which would allow more time for an in-depth follow-up, or for the group to develop a community action plan. As you begin to envision your event, you should set the agenda and format depending on your desired outcomes.

Choose a Date

When picking the date and time for your house party, consider holidays and other local events, as well as the general preferences of your invitees. A weeknight evening is often a good time to host an adults-only event, as it allows professionals to come straight from work and does not conflict with major weekend plans. If you are choosing between days, do not hesitate to ask an expert, such as an administrator at your church or synagogue, about when they've had the most success with attendance at their events.

Guidelines for Viewing

Now that the basics are decided, you can start planning your event!

2–4 Weeks Prior

- Put together your invitation list
- Design and mail or email your invitation. Make sure your invitation outlines all the details of your event including the name of the film and a description of the activities you have planned (e.g., panel discussion, moderated Q&A, open group dialogue, small group activities, etc.). If you are planning a potluck or bring-your-own event, make sure you detail this expectation in your invitation as well.

2 Weeks Prior

- Plan the food and drinks you will serve. Will you serve drinks and light snacks? A full buffet meal? Do you need to rent tables, chairs, plates, glasses, and utensils, or purchase disposable ones?
- Prepare an agenda for your event. This can be as formal or as informal as you wish, but you should decide on the timing for arrivals, introductions, starting the film, and starting the post-film discussion or supplemental activities. Be sure to allow time for a bathroom and refreshment break after the film ends. This guide provides questions and discussion prompts for creating a unique, dynamic dialogue.

1 Week Prior

- Send out a reminder to those guests who have RSVP'd yes or those who have not RSVP'd at all.
- Consider providing RSVP'd guests with links to the film's website, the film's official Facebook page, or Twitter feed to garner involvement in the issues and get your guests excited about your event.

Guidelines for Viewing

3 Days Prior

- Purchase the necessary food, drinks, and other event supplies.
- Set up your technology—whether it is a projector and screen or a TV and DVD player, you want to ensure you have it up and running before the day of the event.
- Confirm with your invited guests one more time, and consider resending links to any late RSVPs.
- Prepare and practice an introduction to the film and a welcome to your event.

The Day of the Event

- Test the tech before guests arrive. Give yourself ample time to test the DVD player, projector, and/or sound equipment to make sure everything will run smoothly.
- Arrange your space to accommodate your guests, and to create a welcoming environment for a meaningful event and discussion.
- Don't forget your agenda. Make the most out of your time by following the agenda you created. Introduce the film and explain why you are bringing it to the group. Before the film starts, let your guests know that there will be a short discussion, panel discussion, or activities in small breakout groups afterwards.

The Day After

- Send a thank-you note to all your guests, and encourage them to continue the discussion and/or the action plan that was started at your house party.
- Think about the ways that you will continue to work towards the ideals and goals the film brought up for you—even after the movie ends. Refer to the Extension Activities section of this guide for ways to get involved.

Things to Consider

Before Watching

This is a film that is rooted in history, but that carries with it very contemporary implications and questions that hit at the heart of humanity. Take a moment to think about one or all of the following themes. Consider your relationship to these themes. What opinions or thoughts do you have on these subjects already? Considering these topics, and your personal relationship to them, before you view the film will allow for higher-level thinking during the viewing as well as more productive dialogue afterwards.

- What are the immediate and far-reaching effects of slavery in this country? In what ways did the institution of slavery debilitate an entire group of people for generations? What tactics were intentionally used to achieve this? How do you see the manifestations of these tactics in society today?
- What is your definition of faith? What are the responsibilities that come with faith? What responsibilities do our faith-based leaders have, as influencers in their communities?
- The “banality of evil” is a phrase that was coined in relation to the Holocaust. How does this phrase, which refers to the role of bystanders to a human rights violation, relate to slavery? When considering slavery, who are the bystanders, perpetrators, victims, and allies?
- What do you already know about Nat Turner and the nuanced history associated with his uprising? What questions do you have about Nat Turner or about the history of slave rebellions in general?
- As you watch the film, consider the use of music, point of view, lighting, and editing. Do you notice any literary devices, such as foreshadowing (i.e., predicting future events), metaphor, or symbolism? What historical details do you notice? Exploring this film as an art form and incorporating an examination of the medium into the discussion of content will provide textual elements that you can critically analyze later.
- Consider the complex and seemingly random morality that exists within an amoral time, such as during slavery or during war. What is a hero? What is justified violence? How does one measure morality when it seems that no context for morality exists?

Things to Consider

Before Watching (con't.)

- One of the ways in which the institution of slavery almost destroyed an entire culture was by breaking apart families. For generations, babies were taken from their mothers, wives from their husbands, fathers from their children. Slaves lost their names and, with that, their heritage, their forefathers, and their tangible sense that generations of culture and society preceded them. Consider the long-term effects that this destruction of the African American family unit has had on black culture through the generations. How have members of black society worked to regain the sense of heritage that was stolen from them? What ongoing societal forces have worked both for and against their progress?

After Watching

This film can be appreciated on many levels: as a work of art; as an interpretation of a complex and under-documented history; or as a call to action, a story whose message is almost as painfully relevant today as it was in its own time. Use the following discussion prompts to broaden your thinking about the film and the issues it depicts.

Media Literacy/ Film Studies

- Nate Parker took the title for his film from a 1915 film by the same name, which was a highly racist depiction of the United States during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Why do you think Parker chose to repurpose this title? How does the use of this title add to the meaning and impact of the film?
- Notice how color is used in this film. Notice how the color saturation correlates to the intensity of the scenes. How did the filmmaker use color saturation and light and shadow to tell a story or create a certain feeling for the audience?
- This film has a number of very graphic scenes. Why do you think the filmmaker chose to depict the violence rather than imply it? How is the graphic depiction used as a storytelling device?
- Music plays an important role throughout *The Birth of a Nation*, from spirituals and rhythmic drums to Nina Simone's haunting rendition of "Strange Fruit." Explore the use of music as a device in this film. How does the music add depth and power to the story?

Things to Consider

After Watching (con't.)

Historical Context

- Despite impossible conditions throughout the long history of slavery in the United States, slaves managed to periodically rise up in rebellion. What impact did these rebellions and uprisings have on the abolitionist movement?
- Very little is known about Nat Turner, and what we do know from his contemporaries was documented by whites. How does this affect the retelling of his story?
- What did you learn about life as a slave from watching this film? How did the portrayal of slave life make you feel? How have your thoughts and feelings about slavery been changed by the viewing of this film?
- Some historians describe Nat Turner as an insane vigilante, others as a heroic human rights activist. How did Parker choose to depict Nat Turner? Who was the Nat Turner you saw in this film?

Religion and Faith

- What was the role of religion during this time in history? Do you think the prominent role of religion was incongruous with the ethics of society at large? Explain.
- Explore the theme of faith in the film. How was faith used as a device—as metaphor or symbol? What role did faith play in Nat Turner's life? In the lives of slaves in the film? How did the slave owners invert faith to be used against the slaves as a method of control?
- How did the slave owners force Turner to be complicit in their manipulation? How did Turner find ways to be subversive with his faith—even in front of the slave owners themselves? Relate this to the role that faith has in your life

Things to Consider

After Watching (con't.)

Contemporary Context

- Traditionally the history of slavery, like most of African American history, has been told by white people. As a result, much of the accuracy of the history can be questioned, based on perspective and bias. Nat Turner is often portrayed in the historical narrative as a “half-crazed avenger,” yet many thought leaders in black culture see him not as a villain, but as a hero. How does this dichotomy continue in the public discourse around race today?
- Relate the story of Nat Turner to that of Huey P. Newton and the Black Panthers. How might Turner be viewed as one of the first African American revolutionaries in the fight for freedom and, eventually, in the militant arm of the Civil Rights Movement?
- This film depicts the unfathomable trauma that Africans were forced to endure, for generations, during the era of slavery. Recent epigenetic studies, like one led by Dr. Rachel Yehuda at New York’s Mount Sinai Hospital, suggest that trauma can be passed down from parent to child—not just behaviorally, but on a cellular, physiological level. If this is true, how might the trauma of slavery still be affecting the African American community today? What is the generational impact of this sort of institutionalized violence on our culture as a whole?
- Consider the meanings of justice and of mercy in the context of this story. How might these terms be relative rather than absolute?
- How does vigilantism serve an important purpose when the law of the land fails to protect the human rights of its inhabitants? How has rebellion and revolt been used by different people to right the moral wrongs of society? How can we work within the confines of our legal system to create change when we see injustice at work?

Questions for Further Discussion

The painful, shameful history that *The Birth of a Nation* explores raises big questions and invokes big feelings. Use the following questions to reflect on and tease apart some of your responses to the film. These prompts could be used to start a family conversation, a community dialogue, or for journaling to process the emotions and implications that this film brings.

- Nat Turner's rebellion was a violent affair: He organized a group of slaves to rebel without any real objective or plan, and their rebellion seemed more like a bloody rampage than a movement. With this knowledge, do you see this story as heroic or savage? Explain.
- What is justice?
- How does the legacy of slavery manifest in our American culture today? What can we do as citizens of a world that we share to foster open dialogue and collaboration and eliminate the vestiges of our horrific history?
- When Turner was asked after his capture if he felt remorse, he reportedly said, "Was not Christ crucified?" Explore the various implications of this response in the context of religion and faith, as well as in the historical context of slavery.
- Slavery was abolished in the United States, but it still exists in many countries around the globe. Why do you think slavery still exists? What can people do to eradicate slavery? How can this film be used as an impetus to fight contemporary slavery?
- In the film, Turner is inspired to action by a verse of scripture, Samuel 15, Verse 3: "Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass." Read this part of Samuel in its entirety, Samuel 15:1-23, and explore its implications. How could this same chapter be interpreted as both a call to rebellion and a call to obedience?
- Symbolically and literally, Nat Turner believed he'd find salvation for his followers in the city of Jerusalem. Analyze the lyrics to the gospel song "On We Go to Jerusalem" in the context of the story of Nat Turner's Rebellion.

Extension Activities

Continue the journey from audience member to agent of change by engaging with a nonprofit or social movement that works to eradicate bigotry, hate crimes, and institutionalized bias.

- Learn more about the legacy of bias in this country through the important work of the Southern Poverty Law Center, whose mission is to “fight hate and bigotry and to seek justice for the most vulnerable members of our society.” Go to www.splc.org to find out more.
- The Emancipation Proclamation was issued in 1863, 32 years after Nat Turner’s rebellion, yet institutionalized racism and race-based violence against blacks are still rampant today. Build on the legacy of Nat Turner and other brave African Americans who saw that their lives were worth more. Go to www.blacklivesmatter.com/find-chapters/, find a local Black Lives Matter chapter, and get involved in the movement.
- Nat Turner’s voice was silenced, along with generations of African Americans. By taking their voices back, the African American community can begin to rebuild the culture that was stolen from them, and start the process of healing. The mission of the National Visionary Leadership Project (NVLP) is to “develop the next generation of leaders by recording, preserving, and sharing the stories of extraordinary African American elders—Visionaries—who have transcended barriers, shaped American history, and influenced the world through the rich African American tradition of social change.” Get involved in this crucial work at www.visionaryproject.org.
- Just as Nat Turner turned to his religion for guidance, as human beings our faith—however we define it—is something that inspires us, bonds us, and heals us. Together we can mobilize this energy to help fight human rights violations, hate crimes, bigotry, and other ills of our society. Check out Religions for Peace—the largest interfaith organization working to end violence and hate—at www.religionsforpeace.org, and get involved.

Additional Resources

The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture
<http://nmaahc.si.edu>

Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property, documentary film by Charles Burnett
www.pbs.org/independentlens/natturner

The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion by Stephen B. Oates
<http://amzn.to/1YC66pb>

The Rebellious Slave: Nat Turner in American Memory by Scot French
<http://amzn.to/1Uj9ip0>

The Southampton Insurrection by William Sidney Drewry
<https://archive.org/details/southamptoninsur00drew>

The Confessions of Nat Turner, a novel by William Styron
<http://bit.ly/ConfNatTurn>

William Styron on Nat Turner in The New York Times
<http://bit.ly/Styron>

William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond by John Henrik Clarke, ed.
<http://amzn.to/21uFvcs>

The Confession of Nat Turner by Thomas Gray
www.docsouth.unc.edu/neh/turner/turner.html

History.com on Slave Rebellions
www.history.com/topics/black-history/slavery-iv-slave-rebellions

Teaching Tolerance
www.teachingtolerance.org

The Nat Turner Project
<http://www.natturnerproject.org>

African American Music As Rebellion: Slavesong to Hip Hop by Megan Sullivan
<http://bit.ly/1SdoltC>

King James Bible
<http://biblehub.com/kjv/>