

The Christianna Outrage, The New York Times, Sept., 1851

a) Read each paragraph.

b) What is the main point being made in the paragraph?

c) Do you have a question about the paragraph? What is it?

1) Resistance to the law is always an offense against the peace of society. No government can exist without punishing breaches of the law, still less, without disaffecting opposition to it. And there is no country in the world, where obedience to law is more prompt and cheerful than in the United States.

2) We have heard a great deal lately about a higher than human law. A great deal of indignation has been vented against certain persons who have avowed their belief in the existence of such a law, and a very large class of our newspapers and public men have zealously sought to make the world believe that the believers in a "higher law" are the enemies of all law and that the peace of society is in imminent danger from their machinations. Very little of this virulent denunciation, in our judgement, has been (honest) or sincere. Partisan schemes, business rivalries, personal animosities, have prompted much of it. These and other motives have incited journalists, orators, politicians, merchants etc. to create a panic in society, to attempt to alarm the country on account of the number of "higher law" men who exist in it, and whose pestilent heresies menace its existence.

3) Our chief regret, in this matter, grows out of the fact that the men who believe in the "higher law", and who act steadily, consistently, and conscientiously on that belief, are not more numerous than they are. No absurdity was ever more gross than that of apprehending danger to society from the conscientiousness of its members. If nobody believed in a higher law, human laws would not be worth the parchment they are written on. It is only because men believe in the justifiable laws of right and wrong - because they feel in their own hearts the consciousness of their existence and sanctity - that they regard human laws as anything but the dictates of the strongest. All reverence for law, all regard for it as a rule of conduct and of life, all (real respect) for its dictates, springs from faith in a supreme law, higher than humanity, and represented to society and to man in these laws of human enactment. And when men lose all conviction of this higher law, their obedience to human law, will depend entirely upon the weakest of all reliances, their own inconsistent and lawless will.

4) In Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, a few days ago, a party of whites attempted to arrest several negroes, claiming them as property, under a law of the United States. The negroes resisted, forcibly, and a mob of negroes acting evidently in concert, came to their aid, resisted all seizure and killed the claimant. This is an offense against law, and must be punished as such. No one will contend that these negroes acted from their conscientious convictions of duty, that they killed this man because they believed it their duty to do so. They acted from passion, from malice, from a determination that the negroes should not perform duties and hold positions which the law had recognized as imposed on them. We observe that the offenders are to be indicted for treason. Their offense may technically be considered treason; yet it seems to sadly belie the definition of that grave crime. These negroes resisted the Marshal, resisted the execution of the law, but we doubt whether they designed to overthrow the government of the United States. It is not easy to say what would fill a negroes mind under such circumstances; but we do not believe that any of them had really any thoughts of dethroning the President, scattering the Cabinet and usurping federal powers. And yet such intention as this - at least some dim purpose of upsetting the federal

Constitution, seems to us essential to the idea usually entertained of "levying arms against the government" of the United States.

4) Marshals and Sheriffs have been often resisted, laws of the United States and of the several States, have often been trampled upon. The offense, as was proper and necessary, has been punished, -- but it was not called treason. Governor Johnston in the letter to Messrs. Cadwallader, Swift & Co., puts this matter in a proper light. He cautions them against exaggerations of the offense committed. It is heinous in itself. They have committed murder and will be tried and punished therefore. The idea of rebellion, of an insurrectionary movement in Lancaster county, he treats as absurd. The laws, he says, have been grossly violated, and the judicial tribunals will punish the offenders. He thinks it unwise to give the crime committed undue dignity, or to pursue such a course as shall inspire distrust of the regular course of law. We think so too.

1) Although the editorial does not directly refer to this issue, what conflict is behind the events in this editorial? What evidence do you have to support this conclusion?

2) In your opinion, who are the "believers in higher law" referred to in the editorial? From the editorial, can you tell whether the New York Times agrees with these people on this issue?

3) What happened in Lancaster County? What position does the Times take on this event? In your opinion, who do you think is charging that "treason" took place? Do you agree with the editorials views on the events in Lancaster? Why or why not?

4) If you were on the jury, would you find the defendants guilty of treason? guilty of murder? Why or why not?

Homework: Write a letter to the New York Times in response to this editorial.