

ASSIGNMENT IN PROGRESS FOR 7.5 ELA NIX (VIP)

DUE MARCH 9, 2021

🔊 READ ALOUD

🔍 TRANSLATE



LAST DIARY ENTRY OF JOHN WILKES BOOTH

by John Wilkes Booth • 1865

FONT SIZE A A A

John Wilkes Booth was a famous actor, as well as a Confederate sympathizer during the Civil War. Booth tried on several occasions to kidnap and assassinate President Abraham Lincoln in order to aid the South against the Union. He and his co-conspirators failed to kidnap Lincoln on March 20, 1865 in Richmond Virginia. Booth then hatched another plan upon learning that Lincoln would attend the play "Our America's Cousin" at Ford's Theatre in Washington D.C. on April 14 (five days after the South surrendered). Booth snuck into President Lincoln's private theatre box at 10:15 p.m., shot the president once in the head, stabbed his companion, and jumped onto the stage shouting "Sic semper tyrannis" (thus always to tyrants), which the audience first thought was part of the show. Booth then fled D.C., which he recounts in this diary entry. President Lincoln was taken to a house across the street before he died the following morning, April 15. Booth was tracked on April 26 to a tobacco farm in Virginia where he refused to surrender to Union soldiers. The barn he was hiding in was set on fire and Booth was shot and killed by a soldier before he could escape or surrender.

As you read, note the language that Booth uses to describe himself in comparison to others, such as Lincoln.

- [1] Until today nothing was ever thought of sacrificing to our country's wrongs. For six months we had worked to capture, [1] but our cause being almost lost, something decisive [2] and great must be done. But its failure was owing to others, who did not strike for their country with a heart. [3] I struck boldly, and not as the papers say. I walked with a firm step through a thousand of his friends, was stopped, but pushed on. A colonel [4] was at his side. I shouted Sic semper [5] before I fired. In jumping broke my leg. I passed all his pickets, [6] rode sixty miles that night with the bone of my leg tearing the flesh at every jump. I can never repent [7] it, though we hated to kill. Our country owed all her troubles to him, and God simply made me the instrument of his punishment. The country is not what it was. This forced Union is not what I have loved. I care not what becomes of me. I have no desire to outlive my country. The night before the deed I wrote a long article and left it for one of the editors of the National Intelligencer, [8] in which I fully set forth our reasons for our proceedings. He or the govt - [9]



"Lincoln Assassination slide, 1900" by Unattributed is in the public domain.

After being hunted like a dog through swamps, woods, and last night being chased by gunboats till I was forced to return wet, cold, and starving, with every man's hand against me, I am here in despair. And why? For doing what Brutus [10] was honored for. What made Tell [11] a hero? And yet I, for striking down a greater tyrant [12] than they ever knew, am looked upon as a common cutthroat. [13] My action was purer than either of theirs. One hoped to be great himself. The other had not only his country's but his own wrongs to avenge. I hoped for no gain. I knew no private wrong. I struck for my country and that alone. A country that groaned beneath this tyranny, and prayed for this end, and yet now behold the cold hands they extend to me. God cannot pardon [14] me if I have done wrong. Yet I cannot see my wrong, except in serving a degenerate [15] people. The little, the very little, I left behind to clear my name, the Government will not allow to be printed. So ends all. For my country I have given up all that makes life sweet and holy, brought misery upon my family, and am sure there is no pardon in the Heaven for me, since man condemns [16] me so. I have only heard of what has been done (except what I did myself), and it fills me with horror. God, try and forgive me, and bless my mother. Tonight I will once more try the river with the intent to cross. Though I have a greater desire and almost a mind to return to Washington, and in a measure clear my name - which I feel I can do. I do not repent the blow I struck. I may before my God, but not to man. I think I have done well. Though I am abandoned, with the curse of Cain [17] upon me, when, if the world knew my heart, that one blow would have made me great, though I did desire no greatness. Tonight I try to escape these bloodhounds once more. Who, who can read his fate? God's will be done. I have too great a soul to die like a criminal. Oh, may He, may He spare me that, and let me die bravely. I bless the entire world. Have never hated or wronged anyone. This last was not a wrong, unless God deems it so, and it's with Him to damn or bless me. As for this brave boy with me, who often prays (yes, before and since) with a true and sincere heart - was it crime in him? If so, why can he pray the same?

I do not wish to shed a drop of blood, but 'I must fight the course.' 'Tis all that's left to me.

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Notes

🔴 All ○ Definitions ○ Footnotes

- Booth and several co-conspirators worked for months to kidnap Lincoln and his successors.
- Decisive** (*adjective*): settling an issue; producing a conclusive result
- Booth conspired with several others to assassinate Lincoln, Vice President Andrew Johnson, and Secretary of State William H. Seward in the same night. Seward was stabbed but survived, and Johnson's assassin failed to attack him at all.
- A colonel is a military officer. President Lincoln attended the play with his wife, Mary, as well as the young army officer Henry Rathbone and his fiancé Clara Harris. Booth stabbed Rathbone.
- After he assassinated Lincoln and jumped out of the box to the stage, Booth shouted the Latin phrase "sic semper tyrannis," meaning "thus always to tyrants," a yet shorter version of "thus always I bring death to tyrants" (sic semper evello mortem tyrannis).
- A picket is a party of soldiers performing a particular duty.
- Repent** (*verb*): to feel or express regret about a wrongdoing
- The National Intelligencer newspaper was published in Washington, D.C. from 1800 to 1870. John Wilkes Booth wrote a letter explaining his position on Lincoln to the editors of the newspaper, which he entrusted to his sister who had it published in the Philadelphia Inquirer on April 19, 1865.
- Here, Booth stops writing for the night. He writes the remainder of the entry the following morning.

ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1 2 3 4 5

1. PART A: Which TWO of the following best identify the central ideas of this text?

- ☐ A Booth believes he will be remembered as a hero against tyranny like Brutus.
- ☐ B Booth sees Lincoln as a tyrant who must be eliminated for the good of all.
- ☐ C Booth assassinates Lincoln because he feels rejected by the Union, the South, and his family.
- ☐ D Booth does not want to assassinate Lincoln but must for the good of the Union.
- ☐ E Booth is willing to sacrifice his future because he does not want to live to see his country destroyed.
- ☐ F Booth is willing to sacrifice his life to avenge the deaths of his fellow Confederate soldiers.

SAVE & NEXT

10. Brutus was a Roman statesman who murdered Julius Caesar, his father-figure whom he and other Roman senators feared wanted to become dictator of the republic.
11. Tell was a mythic figure in Swiss history that assassinated a tyrant and helped lay the foundations for the Old Swiss Confederacy.
12. **Tyrant** (*noun*): a ruler who has complete power over a country and who is cruel or unfair
13. A cutthroat is a killer or murderer.
14. **Pardon** (*verb*): to forgive
15. **Degenerate** (*adjective*): showing evidence of decline; undesirable
16. **Condemn** (*verb*): to declare something as wrong or evil
17. Cain was the son of Adam and Eve who became the first murderer of the Bible when he slew his brother, Abel.