

# Johnny Tremain

## Study Guide

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For the novel by Esther Forbes



## Table of Contents

Note to Instructor .....	4
Synopsis .....	5
About the Author.....	6
Background Information .....	7
Chapter 1 .....	9
Chapter 2 .....	16
Chapter 3 .....	20
Chapter 4 .....	25
Chapter 5 .....	28
Background Reading—The Boston Tea Party .....	31
Chapter 6 .....	32
Chapter 7 .....	33
Chapter 8 .....	37
Chapter 9 .....	42
Background Reading—Lexington and Concord.....	43
Chapter 10 .....	45
Chapter 11 .....	49
Chapter 12 .....	51
Ideas for Final Projects .....	54
Essays .....	57
Additional Resources .....	59
Answer Key .....	Separate File

## Synopsis

In colonial Boston, proud, orphaned, quick-tempered Johnny Tremain works as an apprentice to Mr. Lapham, a master silversmith, now getting on in years. More clever and skilled than the other two apprentices living at the Laphams', Johnny has the run of the Lapham household. His future seems secure: when he is old enough, Johnny will marry Priscilla Lapham, one of old Mr. Lapham's granddaughters, and inherit the silversmith shop. There he will live out his years, fashioning silver cups and basins and other fine ware for the well-to-do of Boston society.

But fate or providence has different plans for Johnny Tremain. A crippling accident at the shop leaves Johnny unable to work as a silversmith. He is forced to find other labor, or risk starvation or the gallows.

Finally securing employment at *The Boston Observer* newspaper, Johnny soon finds himself caught up in the on-going struggle between Boston's anti-British Whigs and pro-British Tories. In addition to delivering *The Observer* throughout Boston and the outlying towns, Johnny begins delivering letters for Sam Adams and The Boston Committee of Correspondence, the secret communications network of the American rebels.

When Boston is occupied by British soldiers in retaliation for the Boston Tea Party, the struggle against England intensifies. Johnny learns from his friend Rab Silsbee and patriots such as Sam Adams, Paul Revere, John Hancock, and James Otis that both individuals and nations will pay a high price for freedom and independence.

By the close of the novel, Johnny has discovered the secret of his ancestry, he has learned that the Yankees have a fighting chance against the redcoats and he is prepared to take his place among the rebel armies encircling the British in Boston. Johnny has learned too that the ideals of the American Revolution must first conquer the human heart before they can conquer armies and topple empires.

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2. What does the location of the Lapham house tell you about the family's social standing in Boston society?
  
3. What other clues do you find in the chapter that tell you about the economic status of the Laphams?
  
4. What general lesson was old Mr. Lapham trying to teach Johnny at the breakfast table that morning?
  
5. Mr. Lapham asks Johnny to read the following verse from the Old Testament book of Leviticus: “. . . And I will break the pride of your power; and I will make your heaven as iron and your earth as brass.” (Leviticus 26:19) Who is the “I” speaking here?

What is “the pride” of Johnny’s “power”? In other words, what is it that makes Johnny so proud?

How might Johnny’s pride be “broken”?

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6. Does Mr. Lapham's use of Bible readings at the breakfast table accomplish its purpose? Explain your answer.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. What do we learn in Chapter 1 about Mr. Hancock's political beliefs?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. What do we learn about Mr. Lapham's political beliefs?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
9. What is Johnny's middle name? What was Johnny's mother's name? What is the significance of these names?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
10. What did Johnny's mother tell him he was to do if he ever "got to the end of everything"?

### **Dig Deeper:**

Mr. Lapham said, “I don’t hold much with these fellows that are always trying to stir up trouble between us and England. Maybe English rule ain’t always perfect, but it’s good enough for me. Fellows like Mr. Hancock and Sam Adams, calling themselves patriots and talking too much. Not reading God’s Word—like their parents did—which tells us to be humble.”

Mr. Lapham seems to imply that to speak out against the British the way John Hancock and Sam Adams do is, according to the Bible, disobedience. Consider the following quotations:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those [authorities] that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience.

### Romans 13:1–5

Upon careful review of the author’s reasoning in this passage [from Romans 13], it appears that his arguments to enforce submission are of such nature as to conclude only in favor of submission to such powers as he [St. Paul] himself describes, i.e., such as rule for the good of society. . . . If it be our duty to obey our king, merely for this reason, that he rules for the public welfare . . . it follows . . . that when [the king] turns tyrant [becomes a dictator] we are bound to throw off our allegiance to him, and to resist.

From “A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-resistance to the Higher Powers,” a sermon given by Jonathan Mayhew in 1750.

*Johnny Tremain Study Guide*

Self-preservation is an instinct by God implanted in our nature. Therefore we sin against God and Nature when we tamely resign our rights to tyrants if it be in our power to defend ourselves. . . . [God] commands us to stand fast in the liberty wherewith he hath made us free and not to bow down to any tyrant on earth. . . . The cause of liberty is the cause of God and truth, [and] to take arms and repel force by force, when our liberties are invaded, is well-pleasing to God.

From “Antidote Against Toryism,” a sermon given by Nathaniel Whitaker in 1777. (The American Revolution began in the spring of 1776.)

Do you think speaking out against British rule was disobeying scripture? Write a short essay discussing the following questions:

- Were Bostonians in particular and Americans in general disobeying God when they spoke out against British rule over the colonies?
- Was the American Revolution itself wrong in the eyes of God?
- More generally, is it ever right to rebel against authority? If so, when? If not, why not?

## *Johnny Tremain Study Guide Answer Key*

6. Johnny finds the British arrogant and cruel, but also brave and admirable: cruel when an officer knocked Rab unconscious for merely touching a musket, admirable when they are like Lt. Stranger—good humored and courageous.
7. The Sons of Liberty are planning on tarring and feathering the Lytes. Answers will vary.

### *Chapter 8*

#### *Vocabulary:*

1. genealogy; 2. plague; 3. wraiths; 4. routed; 5. canny; 6. courting; 7. lucid; 8. sortie; 9. placate.

#### *Questions:*

1. Johnny discovers the Lyte family tree in the Bible. He is Merchant Lyte's grandnephew. (Merchant Lyte's brother—Roger Lyte—was Johnny's grandfather.)
2. Johnny decides that he does not want to be a Lyte for fear of becoming like the Lytes. He is rejecting their entire way of life.
3. Up to now, life in the colonies for many has been like a crooked card game—the rich hold nearly all the good cards. The coming revolution (“ . . . the cards are going to be reshuffled . . .”) will end the unfair advantage of people like the Lytes. People will be allowed to succeed or fail on their work and abilities alone. (The cards will be “dealt again.”)
4. The British captured cannon and gunpowder in Charlestown.
5. “If we could have known but an hour, two hours, in advance what the British were intending [the Minutemen] would have been there before the British troops arrived instead of a half hour after they left.”—Sam Adams
6. Sam Adams: We will fight for the rights of Americans. Rab: We will fight for the rights of Englishmen—everywhere. James Otis: We will fight for men and women and children all over the world.
7. “Only that a man can stand up.” To Otis, the Revolution should be fought to defend basic human rights and human dignity and to defend the principle (not yet written down in the Declaration of Independence) that “all men are created equal.”
8. 1943. World War II. WWII was also fought to preserve basic human rights—freedom of speech, press, and religion—that were being trampled by the Japanese, the Germans, and the Italians.
9. Answers will vary. (Not every “liberation movement” shares the democratic ideals of the American colonists)
10. Answers will vary. Johnny has many of the Lyte characteristics: pride, arrogance, bullying, a concern for appearances, a scorn for the less talented and the common.
11. Perhaps he might have become as bad as Lyte were he admitted into the Lyte family early in the story. Notice that Isannah has been corrupted by living with the Lytes.

### *Chapter 9*

#### *Questions:*

1. They learn that the British fort at Portsmouth is not well-defended.
2. They decide to attack the fort and take its supplies before British reinforcements arrive.
3. Answers will vary. Johnny never formally forgave Dove. Johnny and Rab even get Dove drunk to get information out of him, but Johnny has learned to take pity on him.