

By Jean C. O'Connor

BOOK EXCERPT

“Boston Discusses the Massacre”: Theme Study in Revolutionary Times

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The chapter that follows is reprinted with permission from *The Remarkable Cause: A Novel of James Lovell and the Crucible of the Revolution* by Jean C. O'Connor, Knox Press © 2020, All Rights Reserved. It is originally titled Chapter 18, Boston Discusses the Massacre: *A Short Narrative*. *The Remarkable Cause: A Novel of James Lovell and the Crucible of the Revolution* is available at [Amazon](#), [Barnes & Noble](#), and your local bookstore where books from Simon & Schuster are sold.

Introduction

Use this chapter from *The Remarkable Cause: A Novel of James Lovell and the Crucible of the Revolution* as a short story for grades 7 – 12 to explore themes of interpersonal conflict, conflict resolution, and the value of law.

The situation in Boston in 1770 is brought to life in this reading as conflict escalates between the townspeople and the British. The setting is the Boston Latin School; the characters are Master John Lovell of the Boston Latin School and his son James Lovell, who teaches alongside his father in the big square room on School Street.

Contents

- Background
- Context

- Vocabulary
- “Boston Discusses the Massacre”
- Afterword
- Questions
- Paragraph or Multi-Paragraph Writing
- Standards Alignment
- Resources

Background

- The Boston Latin School was established in 1635 to teach students to become lawyers and ministers. It is the oldest public school in our country. Students were boys who became leaders in the town.
- The colonists were used to agreeing on their own taxes under the guidance of their Provincial Assemblies. But the king and Parliament dispensed with the Provincial Assemblies, instead imposing taxes to pay for expensive British wars, including the French and Indian War.
- Following years of protest, burning in effigy, destruction of the royal governor's home, and mob riots on the part of the colonists, Parliament repealed the unpopular Stamp Act in 1766.
- Parliament then declared its power to tax, issuing the Declaratory Act, followed by a new set of taxes in 1767, the “Townshend Acts.”

Boston Discusses the Massacre

- Protests in Boston continued, so the British sent regiments to live amongst the townspeople and enforce policies.

Context

- By the spring of 1770, Boston was occupied by over 2,000 British soldiers, quartered in private homes and public facilities. They had arrived in 1768 to enforce British tax policies.
- Conflict broke out between British soldiers posted on King Street and a group of angry townspeople.
- According to eyewitnesses, on March 5, 1770, townspeople threw snowballs, rocks, and ice fragments at one soldier. Others came to his aid, under Captain Preston. Before long, shots were fired and three in the crowd fell dead, while two others were severely injured. This violence became called the Boston Massacre.
- Town leaders determined a trial would be held to establish the guilt or innocence of the soldiers. First, witnesses must be questioned. Their statements formed a booklet, *The Short Narrative of the Horrid Massacre*.

Vocabulary

- Deposition
- Deponent
- Magna Carta
- Quartering

Book Excerpt: “Boston Discusses the Massacre”**April 15, 1770**

“Listen to this,” James said. It had been a full day at school. Classes had gone well with a few

interruptions from Francis, who had a violent cough, and Charles, who had to run outside twice with an upset stomach. Otherwise, the boys worked diligently, and for once James had no need to threaten or chastise the scholars for want of effort.

Now it was nearly dismissal time. James had just finished reading *A Short Narrative of the Horrid Massacre*, the town’s collection of depositions for witnesses and participants in the Boston Massacre. Shortly after the dreadful events, the town meeting had chosen Joseph Warren, James Bowdoin, and Samuel Pemberton to obtain the facts of the situation. They had turned over the task of getting depositions to justices of the peace, who had taken ninety-six statements.

Of course, the goal of *A Short Narrative of the Horrid Massacre* was to convince the townspeople of the guilt of the soldiers. Even though copies were not to be distributed within Boston, town officials reasoned that providing copies for neighboring towns would do just as well for release of information. While he usually did not talk about happenings in the town at school, James decided to discuss *A Short Narrative* with the students.

“Tell me what you think of this,” James said. The boys stopped their reviews of the assigned readings, shut their books, and turned to him, their attention focused.

James read a statement aloud from the introduction to *A Short Narrative of the Horrid Massacre*: “While the town was surrounded by a considerable number of his Majesty’s ships of war, two regiments landed and took possession of it; to support these, two other regiments arrived sometime after from Ireland: one of which landed at Castle Island, and the other in the town.”

“The troops stayed here for nearly two years,” said Lewis, a lively boy in the second form.

“They were everywhere. Until this week, we couldn’t go to the shops or the common without seeing the troops,” added James Jr.

Boston Discusses the Massacre

“So, you all know the difficulty.” James picked up the pamphlet again. He was proud of James Jr. for speaking up. A good student, he was usually shy.

“Thus were we, in aggravation of our other embarrassments, embarrassed with troops, forced upon us contrary to our inclination—contrary to the spirit of Magna Carta—contrary to the very letter of the Bill of Rights, in which it is declared that the raising or keeping a standing army within the kingdom in time of peace’—by the way,” he added, interrupting the reading, “what again was the Magna Carta and why was it important?”

“The Magna Carta was the great charter that the knights and lords of King John forced the king to sign after the Battle of Runnymede in England in 1066. Since it limited the king’s power, in a way it was the beginning of Parliament,” said one of the older students, Daniel. Heads nodded and a murmur of agreement went through the group.

Across the room Master Lovell, who had been checking on work in the garden, returned and looked inquiringly at the discussion going on. Usually the boys would be reading at this time. He sat at his desk and shuffled his books to one side, his head cocked to listen.

“So, the Magna Carta is the beginning of what we know to be English liberty and rights,” James said. “Therefore, it was a very important document for all of us.” He continued reading.

... keeping a standing army within the kingdom in time of peace, unless it be with the consent of parliament, is against the law—and without the desire of the civil magistrates, to aid whom was the pretense for sending the troops hither: who were quartered in the town in direct violation of an act of parliament for quartering troops in America: and all this in consequence of the representations of the said Commissioners and the said Governor....

James looked up. “Quartering troops then, as *A Short Narrative* reminds us, means forcing troops on civilians without their consent. You know the

royal troops stayed in houses, in warehouses, and often in inns.”

“My father had to take officers into our inn,” said William. “He told me to be polite to them, but he didn’t want them to stay there.”

“That was unquestionably a problem for your father and for others,” James said in agreement.

“The soldiers have presented a problem for a very long time. Now we are all witness to the violence such armed men can bring. Here’s one of the depositions from the night of the massacre.”

James read aloud from the paper, glancing at his father across the room. Master Lovell looked as though he’d like to speak, but instead he shook his head and said nothing.

Benjamin Frizell, on the evening of the 5th of March, having taken his station near the west corner of the Custom-House in Kingstreet, before and at the time of the soldiers firing their guns, declares (among other things) that the first discharge was only of one gun, the next of two guns, upon which he the deponent thinks he saw a man stumble: the third discharge was of three guns, upon which he thinks he saw two men fall, and immediately after were discharged five guns, two of which were by soldiers on his right hand; the other three, as appeared to the deponent, were discharged from the balcony, or the chamber window of the Custom-House, the flashes appearing on the left hand, and higher than the right hand flashes appeared to be, and of which the deponent was very sensible, although his eyes were much turned to the soldiers, who were all on his right hand.

James cleared his throat. “You can see that many details are unclear even to this person who was present. More than once he says he ‘thinks.’ That is because he is not certain. There were too many things happening for him to be sure of the events, and this is true for most of these deponents whose testimonies are included in *A Short Narrative*. People heard guns fire; some state the

Boston Discusses the Massacre

fire came from the soldiers, some believe they saw fire from the middle or upper story of the Custom-House, which stood behind the soldiers. We may never know what happened to be sure.”

Taking advantage of the quiet that lay in the schoolroom, the students’ obvious interest, he continued. “Another deposition from *A Short Narrative* hints that inciting violence was on the soldiers’ minds even before the incident.” James glanced at his father, who was squinting nervously in his direction.

Daniel Calfe declares, that on Saturday evening the 3d of March, a camp-woman, wife to James McDeed, a grenadier of the 29th, came into his father’s shop, and the people talking about the affrays at the ropewalks, and blaming the soldiers for the part they had acted in it, the woman said, the soldiers were in the right; adding, that before Tuesday or Wednesday night they would wet their swords or bayonets in New-England people’s blood.

“That statement indicates pre-meditation,” Henry, an older student, said thoughtfully.

Master Lovell stood up and coughed. Before he could say anything, James concluded, “We can be proud that we have restored order and peace, that the soldiers accused of murder will have a trial, that the soldiers are removed from the town. Making decisions to ensure law and equity in the spirit of Magna Carta is our priority.” The boys silently listened, their faces grave and serious. James glanced at his father, whose face darkened as he pulled his watch from his pocket.

“You may be dismissed,” said John, his voice gruff. “Good night, boys.”

“Good night, sir,” said one after another of the students to both teachers, picking up coats and bags before departing out the heavy door.

Soon John and James were alone in the square, spacious room. “Did you have to devote so much time to reviewing the unfortunate events that have happened in our town lately?” said John, his eyebrows knitting in concern.

“It is their town, and they need to know what is happening just as much as you or I.” James stood up and picked up his coat. He put it on over his waistcoat, smoothing the collar and adjusting his cuffs. “I believe we can promote their wisdom not only by their studies, but by their knowledge of the difficulties we face.”

“You think we have difficulties?” John’s voice rose, his cheeks flushed red. “We have difficulties only because people do not show respect for the king’s troops. Unemployed boys have nothing better to do than to heckle the troops until they fire in self-defense. What is honorable or patriotic about that?”

“I have to agree with you, Father, that the scuffle arose out of idle mischief. Yet troops stationed here for two years have caused nothing but ill feelings, quartered as they are here without need, wandering about the streets leering at the inhabitants as if they were criminals instead of self-respecting citizens.” James chose his words with care. He did not wish to inflame his father’s anger.

John picked up an old exercise book and in his frustration began shredding it into fine bits, the pieces falling into a heap on his desk. “We have the finest system of government in the world. We have a governor that hears our requests and acts on them. We have a court system and the best schools in the colonies. We are permitted to worship as we choose. What else could we want?”

James paused before speaking. He considered his words carefully. “We petitioned the king to remove the unnecessary, harsh taxes. We humbly addressed the King with the utmost courtesy. He ignored—perhaps didn’t even read—the petitions. Instead, we received troops quartered in our town. I don’t think that is a just response to a reasonable request.”

“But,” he added, seeing that his father was about to add to his argument, “the matter is not for us to decide. Also, surely loss of life should be avoided at all costs. The courts will decree the response for those who fired on the five who died.

Boston Discusses the Massacre

The response will affect our students' futures, indeed the futures of us all.

"Therefore, I thought it best for the students to have some time to discuss the event. Good night," James said, standing up. "I hope you have a pleasant evening, Father." He bowed slightly to his father, walked to the door, and left. *It is not always easy to work with one's father*, he reflected, descending the stone steps. *Particularly in this matter, we do not see eye to eye, not at all. I did well to end that discussion peaceably.*

Afterword

It is clear from the reading that Master John Lovell is a Tory, or Loyalist, who agrees with British rule. On the other hand, James Lovell, his son, wants change and freedom from the harsh policies of the British. James is arrested for spying after the Battle of Bunker Hill and thrown into the Boston Stone Jail. Master John Lovell, his wife, and three daughters leave Boston when General Howe evacuates all eight thousand British soldiers and hundreds of loyalists to the British stronghold of Halifax, Nova Scotia, in March of 1775, while James is taken as a prisoner to Halifax, travelling in the same fleet. He is eventually released through an exchange of prisoners authorized by General Washington, returns home, and joins the Second Continental Congress, where he serves five years. Master John Lovell and his family never return to Boston, remaining in Canada as do thousands of Loyalists.

Questions

1. What part does the Magna Carta play in the Boston Massacre?
2. Summarize the position of the Loyalists regarding British policy.

3. What is the position of the patriots, such as James?
4. How do the statements of the witnesses, particularly that of Benjamin Frizell, demonstrate the problem of witness reliability?
5. What was the goal of having the eyewitness reports published months before the trial of the soldiers, as they were in *A Short Narrative of the Horrid Massacre*?
6. How could this event be considered a turning point in the relations between Britain and her American colonies?
7. As Master John Lovell shreds an old exercise book in his frustration, he explains why he thinks British rule is the best course for the colonies. Do his ideas seem reasonable? Explain.
8. How does James end the discussion with his father? Is this a good way to conclude verbal exchanges with someone with whom one disagrees?
9. How do you manage potential arguments with anyone? What, if anything, can you learn from how James finishes his talk with his father?
10. From the interaction between James and his father, give three ways that conflict can be deescalated, if not resolved.

Paragraph or Multi-Paragraph Writing

Argumentative:

Make a claim about the effectiveness of the way James handled the dispute about British policies with his father, Master Lovell, and provide evidence to support your claim.

Boston Discusses the Massacre

Explanatory:

How does this excerpt show that despite disagreements with British policy, especially taxation, the colonists still support British law?

Narrative:

Take the viewpoint of any of the characters introduced in this reading, and write a journal entry, speech, or letter from that character, explaining these events and giving your opinion about them.

Standards Alignment

“Boston Discusses the Massacre” with the accompanying questions and writings align with the following standards:

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

Middle School

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/ social studies.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH. 6-8.6 Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author’s point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.2

Write informative/explanatory texts, including the narration of historical events, scientific procedures/ experiments, or technical processes.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.2.B

Develop the topic with relevant, well-chosen facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples.

High School

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.6

Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary describing political, social, or economic aspects of history/social science.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.2

Write informative/explanatory texts, including the narration of historical events, scientific procedures/ experiments, or technical processes

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.2.B

Develop the topic with well-chosen, relevant, and sufficient facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge of the topic.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.3

Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.2

Write informative/explanatory texts, including the narration of historical events, scientific procedures/experiments, or technical processes.

Boston Discusses the Massacre

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.2.B

Develop the topic thoroughly by selecting the most significant and relevant facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge of the topic.

(Note: Many other Writing Standards may be applicable depending on whether the writing is fully developed or brief.)

C3 FRAMEWORK**Middle School**

D2.Civ.10.6-8. Explain the relevance of personal interests and perspectives, civic virtues, and democratic principles when people address issues and problems in government and civil society.

D2.Civ.14.6-8. Compare historical and contemporary means of changing societies, and promoting the common good.

D2.His.1.6-8. Analyze connections among events and developments in broader historical contexts.

D2.His.3.6-8. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to analyze why they, and the developments they shaped, are seen as historically significant.

D2.His.6.6-8. Analyze how people's perspectives influenced what information is available in the historical sources they created.

High School

D2.Civ.8.9-12. Evaluate social and political systems in different contexts, times, and places, that promote civic virtues and enact democratic principles.

D2.Civ.14.9-12. Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.

D2.His.1.9-12. Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.

D2.His.3.9-12. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.

D2.His.11.9-12. Critique the usefulness of historical sources for a specific historical inquiry based on their maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose.

U.S. HISTORY CONTENT STANDARDS FOR GRADES 5-12

Era 3: Revolution and the New Nation (1754-1820s).

STANDARD 1: The causes of the American Revolution, the ideas and interests involved in forging the revolutionary movement, and the reasons for the American victory.

Standard 1A: The student understands the causes of the American Revolution.

(5-12) Compare the arguments advanced by defenders and opponents of the new imperial policy on the traditional rights of English people and the legitimacy of asking the colonies to pay a share of the costs of empire. [Consider multiple perspectives]

Resources

O'Connor, Jean C. *The Remarkable Cause: A Novel of James Lovell and the Crucible of the Revolution*, Chapter 18, Knox Press, 2021.

York, Neil L. *The Boston Massacre: A History with Documents*. New York: Routledge, 2010.