

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper: 19th Century African American Writer and Reformer

Author: Gayle K. Dietrich, St. Katherine of Sienna School, Baltimore City

Grade Level: Middle/High

Duration of lesson: 2-3 periods

Overview:

In this lesson, students will be introduced to Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, an African-American writer and poet from the Civil War and Reconstruction Era. They will discover Harper's connection to both the abolitionist and reformist movements by examining her writings.

Related National History Standards:

Content Standards:

Era 5: Civil War and Reconstruction (1850-1877)

Standard 1: The causes of the Civil War

Standard 2: The course and character of the Civil War and its effects on the American people

Standard 3: How various reconstruction plans succeeded or failed

Historical Thinking Standards:

Standard 1: Chronological Thinking

E. Interpret data presented in time lines and create time lines.

Standard 2: Historical Comprehension

B. Reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage.

G. Draw upon data in historical maps.

I. Draw upon the visual, literary, and musical sources including:
(a) photographs, paintings, cartoons, and architectural drawings;
(b) novels, poetry, and plays; and,
(c) folk, popular and classical music, to clarify, illustrate, or elaborate upon information presented in the historical narrative.

Standard 3: Historical Research Capabilities

A. Formulate historical questions.

B. Obtain historical data from a variety of sources.

C. Interrogate historical data.

F. Support interpretations with historical evidence.

Lesson Objectives:

- Students will investigate African-American author Frances Ellen Watkins Harper by analyzing her life and poetry.
- Students will explore the reformist messages communicated in her writings and evaluate the potential impact of her work.

Topic Background:

Through-out the school year and especially during Black History Month, students in the United States study famous African Americans, including such prominent figures as Benjamin Banneker, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Harriett Tubman, Langston Hughes, Thurgood Marshall, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Colin Powell. Yet these students need to be exposed to other African Americans who impacted our nation and society, or they will come away believing this is a complete listing of African Americans who measurably contributed to the history of the United States. Frances Ellen Walker Harper is precisely the sort of forgotten hero who needs to be brought back onto the stage of American history.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911) was a free-born black woman and author who supported the abolition of slavery, the promotion of Christianity, women's rights and temperance. Born in Baltimore, Maryland, she was raised by her uncle and aunt after being orphaned at age three. Undoubtedly her views and opinions were shaped by her uncle, William J. Watkins, an abolitionist and teacher who both raised and educated Frances. At 13, she left school and became a servant to a Baltimore bookseller, where her duties included childcare and sewing. Harper was allowed to read her employer's books as part of her payment.

Slavery was a normal part of the world in which Frances Harper grew up; even the city in which she lived allowed the enslavement of her people. Her formative years saw the United States embroiled in controversy about the rights of enslaved human beings. As a free black, she could have chosen to ignore the plight of the black slaves and enjoy her relatively pleasant, free life. Of course, life for free blacks had its own challenges, especially for free black still living in Maryland. Following the passage of the Compromise of 1850, the racial climate in Maryland became increasingly hostile and the Watkins family sold their home and school and fled to Canada. Harper herself chose to leave and move to Ohio where she became the first woman to teach at Union Seminary.¹

¹ Frances Smith Foster, ed., *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader* (New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1990), 9; "Frances Ellen Watkins," VG: Voices from the Gaps: Women Artists and Writers of Color, <http://voices.cla.umn.edu/vg/Bios/entries/watkins_frances_ellen.html> [accessed September 21, 2006].

Harper began writing very early on in her life. She wrote an article at the early age of fourteen that attracted the attention of the family that employed her. Harper continued to write and publish various works, and by 1845 had written enough poems and prose to compile a volume entitled Forest Leaves. There are no known copies of Forest Leaves still in existence. She continued to write throughout her entire life. Her Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects, published in 1854, is Harper's earliest extant volume and deals heavily with the topics of slavery and abolition. One of Harper's best-known, and most often discussed works is a novel, Iola Leroy (1892), which is the story of a free mulatto woman.²

As the issue of slavery further divided the United States, Harper's own opinions about the subject began to solidify and became the subject of much of her writing. She eventually became an enthusiastic abolitionist who wrote letters, poetry, short stories, essays, lectures, and novels portraying the evils of slavery. She used her talents as an author and a lecturer to help sway public opinion against the institution of slavery. Later, she used the same talents to press for better treatment of women of all colors during a time when women were decidedly second class citizens, unable even to vote.

After the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, Harper turned her focus to other social issues, including women's rights. Harper gained prominence in the women's rights movement, particularly the rights of women of color. She also devoted herself to the cause of Reconstruction and traveled extensively in the South after the Civil War, delivering lectures that advocated reconciliation among all citizens. In 1895, she helped organize the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), alongside Harriet Tubman and others. In an address reprinted in the *Englishwoman's Review* on January 15, 1878, Harper outlines some of her feelings about women, particularly free black women in the South. She wrote:

The women as a class are quite equal to the men in energy and executive ability. In fact, I find by close observation, that the mothers are the levers which move education. The men talk about it...but women work most for it. They [the women] labor in many ways to support the family, while children attend school. They make great sacrifices to spare their own children during school hours.³

It is quite clear from this passage that Harper viewed women as equal to men. Even in her own personal life, Harper challenged commonly held notions about women in the public world. She pursued an active and public career without being married and remained unmarried until the age of thirty-five. To be an unmarried African American woman with a writing and public speaking career at

² Foster, ed., A Brighter Coming Day, 8.

³ Evelyn Nettles, Literary Voices of Nineteenth Century Reform Movements: An Examination of the Literary Work of Frances E. W. Harper (Ph.D. diss., University of Tennessee, 1991), 154.

that point in American history subverted several notions about women's proper place in society.⁴

Harper also expressed her feelings toward alcohol in many of her works. Her poem, "A Little Child Shall Lead Them" is one example:

Only a little scrap of blue
Preserved with loving care,
But earth has not a brilliant hue
To me more bright and fair.
Strong drink, like a raging demon,
Laid on my heart his hand,
When my darling joined with others
The Loyal Legion band.
But mystic angels called away
My loved and precious child,
And o'er life's dark and stormy way
Swept waves of anguish wild.⁵

Harper was also avidly involved with the Women's Christian Temperance movement. She served as superintendent of the Philadelphia and Pennsylvania "colored" chapters of the organization for seven years and remained active in the organization. She published articles entitled, "The Woman's Christian Temperance Union and the Colored Woman" in the *African Methodist Episcopal Church Review*. Her involvement in the organization was so dedicated that the World's Woman's Christian Temperance Union posthumously awarded her a position on their Red Letter Calendar.⁶

Harper also actively supported other organizations that promoted her causes. Throughout her lifetime she worked with the Underground Railroad, the Maine Anti-Slavery Society, the Women's Christian Temperance movement, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the American Equal Rights Association, the Universal Peace Union, the National Council of Women, and the National Association of Colored Women. Harper was among the most influential African American abolitionists of her time, as well as a driving force behind mid-nineteenth century reform.

Harper also incorporated her religious convictions into many of her works. Her poem, "God Bless Our Native Land," provides an excellent example of her perspective on God's grace.

God bless our native land,

⁴ Ibid., 155-156.

⁵ Foster, ed., *A Brighter Coming Day*, 349-350.

⁶ Ibid., 21.

Land of the newly free,
Oh may she ever stand
For truth and liberty.
God bless our native land,
Where sleep our kindred dead,
Let peace at thy command
Above their graves be shed.

God help our native land,
Bring surcease to her strife,
And shower from thy hand
A more abundant life.
God bless our native land,
Her homes and children bless,
Oh may she ever stand
For truth and righteousness.⁷

Because she was extensively published and well received by people from all races and ages in the United States, her written works conveyed her beliefs to a wide variety of people. For example, in her poem, "Renewal of Strength," she states:

The prison-house in which I live
Is falling to decay,
But God renews my spirit's strength,
Within these walls of clay.⁸

Harper married Fenton Harper in 1860 and moved to a small farm near Columbus, Ohio. Their only child, a daughter named Mary was born in 1862. After Fenton died in 1864, Harper and her daughter moved to the east and Harper returned to lecturing. After emancipation, she wrote and lectured to ensure the equal rights of the newly-freed slaves and continued her work to gain greater acceptance for women as equals to men. Harper's public appearances slowed after 1901 and in 1909 her daughter passed away. In 1911 Harper herself died of heart failure.

No one repository owns all of Harper's original works, rather they are located in several places, including the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library.⁹ Until recently, it was very difficult to find secondary works that reprinted Harper's works. Luckily, there has been renewed interest in Harper in recent years and reprints of her poetry and prose are now fairly easy to

⁷ Ibid., 351.

⁸ Ibid., 357.

⁹ Ibid., xv. For a complete list of repositories that house original works by Harper, consult this work.

locate in libraries.¹⁰ Hopefully, new publications like those show that the study of African-American is growing more mature, and that its new richness will enter school curriculum.

Harper was a prominent African American abolitionist and early proponent of women's rights. She supported temperance and religion, and was a prolific author and poet. In her nine published volumes of poetry and other numerous publications, she stressed the themes of abolition, temperance, equal rights, and personal integrity.¹¹

Her letters, poems, short stories, essays, and novels were influential in their time and serve as a window for historians into the events and thoughts of the period. She deserves a prominent place in history and particularly in African American heritage.

Bibliography:

Primary Source Annotations:

Dietzel, Susanne. "A Chronological List of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's Poetry." In Complete Poems of Frances E. W. Harper, ed. M. Graham, 219-223. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

This is an extensive appendix of title and years of publication of most of Harper's poetry and university holdings.

Foster, Frances Smith, ed. Minnie's Sacrifice, Sowing And Reaping, Trial And Triumph: Three Rediscovered Novels By Francis E. W. Harper. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.

This is a detailed interpretation of the relationship of Harper with historical figures of her time.

_____. A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1990.

Foster's book categorizes, in time periods, Harper's letters, poetry, essays, speeches, and fiction with narratives.

"Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, 1825-1911," < [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?pp/PPALL:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(cph+3b23175\)\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?pp/PPALL:@field(NUMBER+@band(cph+3b23175))) > [accessed September 26, 2006].

¹⁰ Foster's A Brighter Coming Day seems to give the most complete accumulation of Harper's work. However, it does not include text of her novels:

¹¹ Nettles, Literary Voices, 311.

Library of Congress etching of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, no date but relates to the Underground Railway. Etching is also featured in *We Are Your Sisters Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (p. 161) and *From Slavery to Freedom* (p. 321).

Gray, Janet. Race and Time: American Women's Poetics from Antislavery to Racial Modernity. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004.

This is a post-antebellum interpretation of Harper's "We Women Radicals" and copies of Harper's "Aunt Chloe," "Iola Leroy," and "The Slave Mothers."

Harper, Frances Ellen Watkins. "Learning to Read," *Sample Text for the Vintage Book of African American Poetry*, <<http://www.loc.gov/catdir/samples/random045/99039428.html>> [accessed July 2005].

This website provides background information on Frances E. W. Harper and the text of some of her works.

Harper, Frances Ellen Watkins. Poems. New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970.

This contains the original poems of Harper that were first published in 1895 and reprinted from a copy that is housed at Fisk University's Library of Negro Collections.

_____. "Sketches of Southern Life," <<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/HarLife.html>> [accessed July 2005].

This is an extensive on-line data base with a nonlinear search engine.

Showalter, Elaine. "Chronology of the Authors' Lives and Times." In Scribbling Women: Short Stories By 19th-Century American Women, eds. Elaine Showalter, Catherine Saint Louis, & Stuart Burrows. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997.

This is a user friendly chronology of historical authors in the 19th century with descriptions and original publications.

Sterling, Dorothy, "Women with a Special Mission." In We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century, ed. Dorothy Sterling, 150-180. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984.

This is an insightful work of primary sources detailing Harper's life and work.

Secondary Source Annotations:

Adams, Janus. Sister Days: 365 Inspired Moments in African American Women's History. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2000.

Adams' work includes four inspirations from Harper. Subjects include: "Law with Perspective 1789" (p. 3-4); "Literature with Defining Ourselves 1859" (p. 10-30); "Emancipation with Resurrection 1862" (p. 9-24); and "Organizing with Purpose 1895" (p. 7-30); (see <www.AfricanAmericanCulture.org> or <emailus@maamc.org> for further information).

Harper, Michael S. & Anthony Walton, eds. "Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911)," <<http://www.loc.gov/catdir/samples/random045/99039428.html>>[accessed July 2005].

A precise rewriting of Harper's 11-stanza poem, "Learning to Read," listed as the second poem in the document with her biography at the end.

Nettles, Evelyn. *Literary Voices of Nineteenth Century Reform Movements: An Examination of the Literary Work of Frances E. W. Harper*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Tennessee, 1991.

This dissertation also provides a reader friendly discussion of Harper's life and some of her work.

Vocabulary:

abolitionist: A person who favors the abolition (doing away with wholly; annulling; to making void) of any institution, especially slavery.

**African American,
Black,
People of color:**

of or belonging to a group of people having skin that is brown, or being related to an African-American. Although African-American is the word preferred by many, black (or Black) is also widely used and is not offensive. As a noun, African-American is now more commonly used, but when describing historical events, black is still often used.

bloodhound: a large dog that has a very good ability to smell things, and is used for hunting animals or finding people who are lost.

carnage:	the violent killing of large numbers of people, especially in war.
chivalry:	very polite and honorable behavior, especially shown by men towards women.
Civil War:	a war fought between groups of people living in the same country, especially the American Civil War, fought between 1861 and 1865.
discord:	disagreement a lack of agreement or shared opinions.
ethics:	a system of accepted beliefs which control behavior, especially such a system based on morals.
feeble:	weak and without energy, strength or power.
free-born:	at birth not a prisoner or a slave (person legally owned by someone else).
genres:	a style, especially in the arts, that involves a particular set of characteristics. In literature, a type of literary composition; Harper's genres are letters, poems, short stories, essays, novels (books), and lectures.
gratitude:	the feeling or quality of being grateful.
groveller:	someone who humbles himself as a sign of respect; who behaves as if he had no self-respect.
idle:	not working or being used.
laurels:	praise for a person because of something which they have done, usually in sport, the arts or politics.
19th Century:	the period of time from 1801 to 1900.
temperance:	the habit of not drinking alcohol because you believe it is dangerous or wrong.
oppression:	when people are governed in an unfair and cruel way and prevented from having opportunities and freedom.
peril:	great danger, or something that is very dangerous.

plunder: to steal goods violently from a place, especially during a war.
2. to steal or remove something precious from something, in an immoral or unnecessarily severe way.

scourge: something or someone that causes great suffering or a lot of trouble

vain: unsuccessful or useless; of no value.

valiant: very brave or bravely determined, especially when things are difficult or the situation gives no cause for hope.

Teaching Procedures:

1. Distribute Resource Sheet #1, "Small Sample of Famous African-Americans Before, During, and After Frances Ellen Watkins Harper." Engage the students in a discussion to determine famous African-Americans who lived during Harper's life.
2. Project Resource Sheet #2, "Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Timeline," and lead students in a discussion about the events that happened during her life. Highlight a few key events for the students so that they can historically contextualize Harper's life (see Resource Sheet #3, "Key Notes").
3. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet #4, "Map of the United States," and Resource Sheet #5, "Knowing Our Author."

Project a copy of Resource Sheet #4.

Instruct students that as you share information about Harper's life and travels, they should take notes on Resource Sheet #5 and color the states on the map (use topic background information for further information).

Inform them that she traveled to Maryland, Virginia, Maine Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, Michigan, Louisiana, Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina, Mississippi, Washington D.C., and Canada. Identify the Antebellum slave and free states. You may want to discuss the route of the Underground Railroad, which traveled through the regions in when Harper traveled during her life.

4. Distribute a copy of Resource Sheet #6, "Letter to Mary Brown," and explain that this is a letter Harper wrote to Mary Brown, the wife of John Brown (if necessary, explain that John Brown was a white abolitionist that was tried and executed for his efforts to empower the slaves).

Instruct students that they are going to read Harper's letter and rewrite it in their own words. They should be told to use Resource Sheet #7, "Vocabulary Sheet," to help them define any unfamiliar words.

5. In order to review information previously relayed and to place Resource Sheet #6 in context, distribute and instruct students to complete Resource Sheet #8, "Reviewing Harper."

Debrief the activity by reviewing student answers.

6. Notify the students that they will be working in groups of four, to conduct a historical investigation into Harper's poetry.

They should then be instructed to choose a recorder (to record the findings); a reporter (to speak out for the group); a task manager (to handle all disputes or disagreements) and a time keeper.

7. Distribute a copy of Resource Sheet #9, "Interpreting Poetry," to each group with Resource Sheet #10, "Poetry of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper."

Complete the first poem, ***She's Free***, together as a class to model the implementation of the interpretational technique.

Instruct student to complete the other two poems with their groups.

Review the student results.

Guide them to answer some of the following questions:

What were some of the issues that Harper cared about?

What were Harper's goals in writing?

What do you think was the impact of her writing?

Does writing have the power to change people's minds about an issue?

8. Direct each group to select a time period in Harper's life.

Each group should construct a poem from her perspective that would represent her sentiments at that time period.

Have students share their results.

9. As an extension activity, students could pretend to be Nineteenth Century writers and design a poetry book with three poems, a cover sheet and a table of contents. The poems should address many of the issues that Harper wrote about in her work, i.e. abolitionism, women's rights and class issues.