

Frances Harper



Frances Harper was a nineteenth-century African-American poet, novelist, and activist for the causes of abolition, temperance, racial equality, and women's rights. A major figure in her day, she has only recently been recognized for her literary achievements and accomplishments in the area of social reform.

Frances Ellen Watkins was born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1825. Orphaned at the age of three, she was educated at The Academy for Negro Youth, run by her uncle, William Watkins. In her teens she worked as a seamstress, but her main love was writing poetry and short stories.

In 1845 her first collection of poetry, *Forest Leaves*, was published. Her poem, "Bury Me in a Free Land" expressed her desire to see slavery ended the United States. The poem includes these verses:

Make me a grave where'er you will,
In a lowly plain, or a lofty hill;
Make it among earth's humblest graves,
But not in a land where men are slaves.

I ask no monument, proud and high,
To arrest the gaze of the passers-by;
All that my yearning spirit craves,
Is bury me not in a land of slaves.

In 1850, the United States Congress passed The Fugitive Slave Act, which required that the citizens of free states aid in the capture and return of runaway slaves to their masters. With sectional feelings hardening, Watkins left her native Baltimore – which was strongly pro-Southern in sentiment – and moved to Ohio in 1851. There she taught domestic science at Union Seminary, part of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in which she had been raised. She was the first female faculty member of the institution.

In 1853, Watkins moved to Pennsylvania, where she became involved in the cause of abolition. She assisted in the operation of the Underground Railroad, the secret network of agents who helped to spirit runaway slaves to freedom in the North. She wrote for prominent abolitionist journals, like William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator* and *Frederick Douglass's Monthly*. She also began giving speeches on abolition. Her first public presentation on the subject, "Education and the Elevation of the Colored Race," was well-received and led to many speaking engagements across the country.

Watkins continued to write during this time. Her second collection of poetry, *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*, was published in 1854. Many of the poems in this collection deal with the evils of slavery. A recurring theme for Watkins was the terror inherent in being a slave. In "The Slave Mother," Watkins gives voice to the fear that haunted all slaves – that their master might at any time break the family apart by selling off one or more of its members:

She is a mother pale with fear,
Her boy clings to her side,
And in her kirtle vainly tries
His trembling form to hide.

He is not hers, although she bore
For him a mother's pains;
He is not hers, although her blood
Is coursing through his veins!

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He is not hers, for cruel hands
May rudely tear apart
The only wreath of household love
That binds her breaking heart.

Harper also used this theme in “The Slave Auction”:

The sale began—young girls were there,
Defenseless in their wretchedness,
Whose stifled sobs of deep despair
Revealed their anguish and distress.

And mothers stood, with streaming eyes,
And saw their dearest children sold;
Unheeded rose their bitter cries,
While tyrants bartered them for gold.

In 1859 her short story, “The Two Offers,” appeared in print, one of the first stories by an African American to be published in the United States. In this tale, Harper ponders the nature of women, asking whether “the mere possession of any human love, fully satisfy all the demands of her whole being?” Ironically, despite this theme, the next year she married Fenton Harper, a widower with three children. They moved to Ohio and had a daughter together, but Fenton died in 1864.

In 1870, five years after the American Civil War ended, Harper moved back to Pennsylvania, this time to Philadelphia. With slavery in America at an end, Harper turned her attention to the causes of racial equality, women’s suffrage, and temperance. She helped to organize the National Association of Colored Women and wrote *Reaping and Sowing: A Temperance Story* (1867) against the use of intoxicating liquors.

In various literary works published in the post-war era, Harper repeated her theme that self-improvement and self-advancement were the key to black progress in America. Drawing on her Christian faith, she also repeatedly called for an African American Moses to rise up and lead her people to the promised land of true equality.

In 1892, Harper published what is perhaps her greatest work, the novel *Iola Leroy*, one of the first novels published by an African American. This tells the story of a woman of both African and Caucasian ancestry before, during, and after the Civil War. The story deals with issues of race and gender and reflects Harper's dedication to the ideal of the strong black woman.

Harper died in Philadelphia in 1911. Her writing fell into obscurity after her death, and only recently has the quality of her literary achievement been recognized. The great African American author and activist W.E.B. DuBois said that it was "for her attempts to forward literature among colored people that Frances Harper deserves to be remembered.... She took her writing soberly and earnestly, she gave her life to it."

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Questions:

1. What was a theme of many of the poems in *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*?
2. How did Harper advance the cause of abolition in the 1850s?
3. On what social causes did Harper focus after the American Civil War?
4. What did Harper see as the key to African-American advancement in the United States?
5. Why should Frances Harper be remembered today?

Answers:

1. What was a theme of many of the poems in *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*?

Answer: Many of the poems in this collection deal with the evils of slavery. A recurring theme for Harper was the terror inherent in being a slave.

2. How did Harper advance the cause of abolition in the 1850s?

*Answer: She assisted in the operation of the Underground Railroad, the secret network of agents who helped to spirit runaway slaves to freedom in the North. She wrote for prominent abolitionist journals, like William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator* and Frederick Douglass's *Monthly*. She also began giving speeches on abolition.*

3. On what social causes did Harper focus after the American Civil War?

Answer: With slavery in America at an end, Harper turned her attention to the causes of racial equality, women's suffrage, and temperance.

4. What did Harper see as the key to African-American advancement in the United States?

Answer: Harper believed that self-improvement and self-advancement were the key to black progress in America. Drawing on her Christian faith, she also repeatedly called for an African-American Moses to rise up and lead her people to the promised land of true equality.

5. Why should Frances Harper be remembered today?

Answers will vary. Some will point to her heroic battles against slavery and for racial and sexual equality. Others will echo W.E.B. DuBois and mention the power of her literary works. Some will mention that she was noteworthy for being a woman who succeeded in the traditionally male fields of literature and social/political advocacy.