

**FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS HARPER: LOVER OF LITERACY**

## TEACHER TOOL 1: BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was born on September 24, 1825, to free black parents in Baltimore, Maryland. Her story, *The Two Offers*, written in 1859, is considered the first short story published by an African American woman. Harper is an important figure to study not only because of her literary accomplishments, but also because she devoted her literary and oratorical talents to open freedom's door for others. Orphaned at the age of three, Frances E. W. Harper was raised by her uncle, Reverend William Watkins, who was a political activist, clergyman, and director of Baltimore's Academy for Negro Youth.

A gifted student, Harper began to write poetry as a teenager, publishing her first book of poems, *Forest Leaves*, when she was only twenty. She obtained various teaching posts, including one at Union Seminary in Wilberforce, Ohio, and later accepted a teaching post in Little York, Pennsylvania. In 1853, she gave up teaching and moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where she lived at the home of William Still, a prominent abolitionist. Still's house was a slave haven on the "Underground Railroad" and the activities that Harper witnessed there changed her forever.

Harper's anti-slavery lectures and poetry made her famous among abolitionists in the North and in Canada. She was one of a brave band of African American women who vocally championed civil and human rights, though in Harper's era women, regardless of color, who spoke publicly about politics, opened themselves up to condemnation for leaving the home, the prescribed "woman's place," and meddling in the affairs of men. Nicknamed "The Bronze Muse," Harper used her powerful poetry, lectures, and journalism to attack the evils of slavery, especially for enslaved women, and to portray the full humanity and dignity of African Americans, enslaved and free.

Harper was a very popular and effective public speaker. One newspaper proclaimed, "Seldom have we heard a more cogent, forcible and eloquent lecture upon any subject, especially from a woman" (*Christian Recorder*, May 21, 1864). Some white listeners believed Harper to be an African American man dressed as a woman or a white woman made up to look black. In a time of prevalent racist as well as sexist attitudes, many people thought it unimaginable that a black woman could be an independent thinker and highly articulate speaker. After the abolition of slavery, Harper devoted her energy to equal rights for women

and to inspiring African American women through activities such as helping to found and lead the National Association of Colored Women in 1896.

Harper published five books of poetry, several novels, and a newspaper column. Her most famous novel, *Iola Leroy* or *Shadows Uplifted*, published in 1892, is the story of a girl who grows up thinking she is white, but after discovering her mother was a slave, is sold into slavery. Following the Civil War, she marries an African American man who partners with her in racial uplift for black people in the South. The title character of Harper's novel personifies the author's conviction that black women had the talent, the strength, and the moral obligation to play a leading role in the advancement of African Americans. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper remained a dedicated activist, writer, and speaker throughout her adult life, remaining active until her death at the age of 85 in 1911.

## REFERENCES

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