

F. E. W. HARPER: UPLIFTED FROM THE SHADOWS

A SOCIAL STUDIES LESSON PLAN

GRADES 6-8

Overview

Born to free black parents in 1824, and orphaned at the age of three, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper authored the first published short story by an African American woman, *The Two Offers* (1859). A literary phenomenon, she published her first book of poetry, *Forest Leaves*, when she was only 20. Her most famous novel, *Iola Leroy* or *Shadows Uplifted* (1892) is about a girl who grows up thinking she is white, but is actually black. After discovering her mother was a slave, Iola is sold into slavery. Identifying with the values and aspirations of African Americans, Iola eventually marries an African American man who partners with her in racial uplift for black people in the South.

Dubbed the “bronze muse,” Harper was an outspoken anti-slavery lecturer who enthralled large crowds in the United States and Canada. Because she defied stereotypes of what women, and especially black women, could accomplish, she is an excellent focal point for a lesson on gender and racial stereotyping. The lesson opens by providing students with a list of Harper’s achievements without identifying her race or gender. Students are then asked to depict F. E. W. Harper in words or a drawn image. Many students will stereotype Harper as male and/or white based on her achievements. Catching students in the act of stereotyping will present a teachable moment for exploring *what* stereotyping is, *why* it occurs, and *how* to stop it. The lesson helps students understand how race and gender stereotyping—past and present—limit human potential and deny individuality. At the same time, it introduces them to the life and work of a dedicated activist, writer, and speaker who defied being stereotyped and who, with this lesson, will be “uplifted from the shadows” of history and become well-known to middle school teachers and students around the country.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Provide a brief account of the life of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper.
- List at least two of the accomplishments of F. E. W. Harper.
- Explain, in their own words, what a stereotype is and why stereotyping is wrong.
- Explain how F. E. W. Harper challenged stereotypes.
- Privately identify a circumstance in which they stereotyped someone or someone stereotyped them and describe it in writing.
- List some ways they can counteract their own tendency to stereotype people.
- List things that they can say to others when they see them stereotyping people.

Guiding Questions

How did Frances Ellen Watkins Harper rise above the attempts of others to stereotype her? Why is stereotyping by gender, race, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, age, or nationality wrong? How can we overcome the tendency within ourselves to stereotype others? How is Harper's poetry an expression of her human individuality?

Suggested Time

2-3 class periods

Preparing to Teach the Lesson

1. For a brief overview of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, read Teacher Tool 1. You may also read about her and several other abolitionists including William Still, one of her mentors, at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p4439.html>.
2. View the short video, *Learning to Read with Aunt Chloe* and be prepared to show the video to your students.
3. You can review some excellent lessons about teaching tolerance at http://www.education-world.com/a_lesson/lesson/lesson294.shtml.
4. Review Student Handout 1, which is a fact sheet about F. E. W. Harper. Student Handout 1 does not reveal Harper's race or gender. It is likely that students will stereotype Harper as a man and/or as white because most students will not believe it possible that a successful nineteenth-century writer could be a black woman. It is also possible that she could be "stereotyped" as black for other reasons—such as the fact that she was anti-slavery. This kind of "race-appropriate" stereotype would be based on the erroneous assumption that only blacks were concerned with ending slavery. Catching students in the act of stereotyping will present a teachable moment for exploring *what* stereotyping is, *why* it occurs, and *how* to stop it.
5. Review Student Handout 2, which contains several stereotypes and the possible negative outcomes of them on the people being stereotyped.
6. Review Teacher Tool 2, which is a guide for leading a discussion about stereotyping.
7. Review Student Handout 3, which contains the full text of several poems by F. E. W. Harper. You can familiarize yourself with more of Harper's poetry at <http://www.poemhunter.com>.

Teaching the Lesson (Suggested Steps)

1. Pass out Student Handout 1 and ask students to read it. Be sure not to reveal Harper's race or gender. Ask students to write a paragraph describing what they think F. E. W. Harper looks like or ask them to draw a sketch of what image comes to mind when they read the fact sheet about this person.
2. Ask students to share their depictions of F. E. W. Harper. Ask them what information about Harper led them to their conclusions about her race and sex?
3. Reveal that F. E. W. Harper was "Frances Ellen Watkins Harper," a black woman. Ask them if they were surprised. Why or why not? Did any students identify Harper as a

black woman—why or why not? *Note: Students will likely give historical reasons for thinking that Harper was white, male, etc. Some might say that they thought Harper was a white male because most black people were enslaved in the 19th century and most people—black and white—were illiterate. Applaud them on their knowledge of history, but underscore that not all black people were illiterate. And, although most writers in the 19th century were male, there were some influential and widely published women writers. Explain that in 19th century America, black women were stereotyped as being illiterate and inarticulate. Although Frances Ellen Watkins Harper defied this stereotype, most people could not imagine how a black woman could be a talented writer and speaker. Many believed that she was a man dressed up to look like a woman because they could not overcome the negative stereotype they had in their minds about black women.*

4. Show the short video, *Learning to Read with Aunt Chloe*. This video features a dramatization of Harper's poem, "Learning to Read." Define important terms used in the poem, such as "Rebs" (Southerners who supported slavery). Explain that Harper created the character of Aunt Chloe in order to convey ideas and information. During Harper's day, women (and especially African American women) were often believed to be passive and illiterate. Ask students to think about Aunt Chloe and if she fits this stereotype.
5. Using Teacher Tool 2, lead a discussion about stereotyping.
6. Distribute Student Handout 2 and discuss the examples of the negative effects of stereotypes.
7. Lead a discussion about how Frances Ellen Watkins Harper overcame the stereotypes that people held about her. Possible responses include: Her adoptive parents and other role models in her life taught her that racist and gender stereotypes were wrong; she learned to define herself from the inside and not be defined by others on the outside; she learned not to let stereotypes determine what she could achieve in life; she persisted and eventually was able to demonstrate, through her extraordinary writing and speaking talents, that she was an individual first and foremost.
8. To conclude the lesson, distribute Student Handout 3 and read, or have a student read, a poem by Harper. Explain that writing poetry is one way for an individual to express his/her unique voice. Using Harper's poems as inspiration, ask students to write a poem about the effects of stereotyping. Students could also write a poem about how they could intervene when they catch someone in the act of stereotyping.