



Frances Ellen Watkins Harper



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

— “The Slave Auction”



Quick Facts

- * 1825-1911
- * African-American poet and civil rights activist
- * First published novel was entitled *Iola Leroy* (1892)

Biography

Frances Ellen Watkins (Harper) was born in 1825 in Baltimore, Maryland, which was a free state at that time. Harper’s mother died before she was three years old, leaving her an orphan. Harper was raised by her uncle, William Watkins, a teacher at the Academy for Negro Youth and a radical political figure in civil rights. Watkins was a major influence on Harper’s political, religious, and social views. Harper attended the Academy for Negro Youth and the rigorous education she received, along with the political activism of her uncle, affected and influenced her poetry.

After she left school in 1839, Harper’s first poems were published in abolitionist periodicals, such as “Frederick Douglass’ Paper.” In 1845, Harper’s first book of poems, *Forest Leaves*, was published. This book was perhaps inspired by the time in her childhood spent in nature, when she would gather leaves tinted by the sun to stimulate her imagination. Her love for nature is shown in the following excerpt from her poem “Days of My Childhood:”

*Oh! childhood had laughter, song and mirth,
The freshness of life, the sunshine of earth;
But instead of its gilded dreams and toys,
I have loftier hopes and calmer joys.*

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Biography continued

In 1850, Harper left Baltimore in order to become the first woman to teach at Union Seminary in Wilberforce, Ohio. Her acceptance of the position was met with considerable protest. The principal of the school at the time, Reverend John M. Brown (who later led the famous revolt at Harper's Ferry), supported Harper, saying, "She has firmly braved the flood of opposition which has manifested itself from the beginning and I take great pleasure in commending her to the favorable notice of the brethren."

In 1852, Harper took another teaching position in Pennsylvania. During this time, she lived in an Underground Railroad Station, where she witnessed the workings of the Underground Railroad and the movement of slaves toward freedom. This experience had a profound effect on Harper, her poetry, and her later work as an activist.

In 1854, Harper was exiled from Maryland because of new slavery laws stating that black people who came in through the northern border of Maryland could be sold into slavery. This marked the beginning of Harper's activism. She began giving anti-slavery speeches throughout the Northern United States and Canada as a representative of the State Anti-Slavery Society of Maine. Her speeches included her prose and poetry, in which she combined the issues of racism, feminism, and classism. This combination is strongly exemplified in a letter written by Harper at the time, in which she states:

From the prison comes forth a shout of triumph over that power whose ethics are robbery of the feeble and oppression of the weak, the trophies of whose chivalry are a plundered cradle and a scourged and bleeding woman.

In addition to her rigorous lecturing schedule, Harper was also working on a second book of poems, *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*, published in 1854. While traveling and lecturing, several thousand copies of her books were sold, and Harper donated a large portion of the proceeds to the Underground Railroad. Harper's marriage to Fenton Harper in 1860 slowed down her lecturing schedule, and the birth of their daughter Mary in 1862 temporarily put a hold on her oratory career.



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As her career progressed, and especially with the end of the Civil War and death of her husband in 1863, Harper became increasingly vocal on feminist issues. She began touring again, giving lectures and publishing poetry in various anti-slavery publications. Harper formed alliances with strong figures in the feminist movement, including Susan B. Anthony. In 1866 Harper gave a moving speech before the National Women's Rights Convention, demanding equal rights for all, including black women. Harper's eloquent efforts to raise consciousness on this issue earned her election as Vice-President of the National Association of Colored Women in 1897.

She also published books during throughout this period, including *Sketches of Southern Life* in 1872, *The Martyr of Alabama and Other Poems* in 1894, and her well-known novel *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* in 1892. *Iola Leroy* is one of the first novels published by a black woman in the United States. *Iola Leroy* was a very important work. Its heroine is Iola Leroy, a free-born mulatta. The book tells of her struggles of being separated from her mother, her search for work, and her experience with racist boundaries in nineteenth-century society. The book, like the rest of Harper's career, intertwined the issues of racism, classism, and sexism that otherwise may not have been recognized as related and intersecting.

Critics and scholars generally regard Harper's work in terms of its tremendous historical importance, along with its respectable writing style. Among the general population, Harper's work has been well-received and valued. Harper's straightforward style of writing may have contributed to her popularity and her revolutionary success.

Harper continued her important work through her lectures and her writing until her death from heart disease in 1911.



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