

FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS HARPER: LOVER OF LITERACY

A LANGUAGE ARTS LESSON PLAN

GRADES 6-8

Overview

In this lesson, students will explore the importance of literacy through an examination of the African American author, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. Harper, who was born to free parents in 1825, authored *The Two Offers*, the first short story published by an African American woman, in 1859. A literary phenomenon, Harper launched her career in 1845 with *Forest Leaves*, her first book of poetry, when she was only 20 years old. *Iola Leroy* or *Shadows Uplifted* (1892), her most famous novel, is about a girl who grows up thinking she is white, but discovers that her mother was a slave and is sold into slavery herself. Following the Civil War, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper married an African American man who partners with her in racial uplift for black people. As an author, Harper naturally valued literacy and was a strong advocate of reading and writing for her fellow African Americans. In the poem "Learning to Read," Harper uses a fictional character, Aunt Chloe, to express the feelings and experiences of enslaved people who sought to be literate. Aunt Chloe explains in verse that "Yankee Teachers" came to the South after Emancipation to educate former slaves and incurred the wrath of "the Rebs!" This lesson plan highlights Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and the importance of traditional literacy. It also features the expansion of the definition of literacy, which now includes skills in such areas as technology, finance, as well as cross-cultural competence. Students will assess the different ways they are "literate" and link their own literacy to freedom and opportunities in the 21st century. We introduce the concept of different types of literacy, but stress reading and writing as foundational to other forms of literacy.

Learning Objectives

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

- Discuss the life of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper.
- List at least two of Frances E. W. Harper's accomplishments.
- Define the term "literacy."
- List some of ways that enslaved people learned to read.
- Describe several ways in which literacy and freedom were "related" in the minds of slaves and slave owners.

Guiding Questions

How has the meaning of literacy changed today from what it meant during Harper's lifetime? How is Harper's poetry an expression of the value she places on literacy? Why weren't enslaved people who spent a lot of time reading books seen as "nerdy" or "uncool" as people who love to read sometimes are today? How is literacy today connected to opportunity, freedom, and success in life?

Suggested Time

1 class period

Preparing to Teach the Lesson

1. To learn about Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, review and print Teacher Tool 1, which is a brief biography. You may read a longer overview of her life at <http://www.search.eb.com/blackhistory/article-9002866>.
2. View the short video, *Learning to Read with Aunt Chloe*, and be prepared to show the video to your students.
3. You may learn about the broadening definition of literacy in the 21st century at <http://www.ncte.org/governance/literacies>.
4. Review and print Harper's poem, "Learning to Read," in Student Handout 1.
5. Review and print Teacher Tool 2, which provides an overview on the motivation of enslaved people to learn to read and write.
6. Review and print Teacher Tool 3, which provides historical context for "Learning to Read."
7. Create a poster that shows the many ways that you, as a teacher, are a literate person by using examples (personal interests, favorite books, accounting ledger, credit card bills, etc.) from your own life.

Teaching the Lesson (Suggested Steps)

1. Ask your students to define literacy. Have them list ideas about what that concept includes in addition to reading and writing. Students may respond with ideas about technology literacy, media literacy, financial literacy, cultural literacy, etc. Emphasize that most of these forms of literacy beyond reading and writing actually have reading and writing as a prerequisite. Record the responses on a flip chart or blackboard. Ask students: How are you literate? Do you value your literacy? Why?
2. Present the poster that shows how you, the teacher, are a literate person by using examples from your life.
3. Distribute Student Handout 1 and provide an overview of the life of Frances E. W. Harper using the information provided in Teacher Tool 1.
4. Show the short video, *Learning to Read with Aunt Chloe*, in which a character that Harper created dramatizes Harper's poem, "Learning to Read." Another option is to read the poem aloud to students.
5. Discuss historical references in "Learning to Read" using Teacher Tool 3. Who were the "Rebs?" Why did the "Rebs" wish to prevent slaves from reading and writing (see line 3 of the poem)? Explain why teachers came to the South to teach slaves.
6. Ask your students: Why do you think enslaved people had a strong motivation to read and write? How do you think they acquired these skills? Use the information provided in Teacher Tool 2 to help them answer these questions.
7. After the discussion above, ask students if Frances E. W. Harper was literate and how she valued her literacy.
8. As a class, find evidence in "Learning to Read" that proves that Aunt Chloe and others mentioned in the poem valued literacy and life-long learning. Note that one aspect of Aunt Chloe's character is that she speaks in a southern rural dialect, which Harper

invokes in “Learning to Read” not to make Chloe sound foolish or ignorant but to ensure that she sounds authentic. It is also important that Chloe takes an active interest in politics, even though as a woman she has no voting rights. The last stanza of “Learning to Read” shows that Chloe is a home-owner, an important statement about her determination to be economically independent as a woman.

9. The following are three optional classroom or homework activities:
 - Provide magazines, brochures, and other materials to cut up and have students make their own posters about their own literacy. The posters should be displayed on the walls, and students should be allowed to present and explain how their posters reflect their literacy.
 - Ask students to write their own poems about the value of literacy—reading and writing as well as technological, media, and cultural literacy.
 - The speaker in “Learning to Read” is the character Aunt Chloe. Write a poem or a diary entry about the events Aunt Chloe describes in the poem but from the point of view of another “speaker” such as a Southerner (Reb) or a Yankee teacher.

Assessment (Optional)

Review the Assessment. If you decide to use it, print the document for distribution to your students. Students are asked to write an essay describing the accomplishments of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. In the essay students are asked to consider the relationship of literacy and freedom. Also, students are expected to relate their personal literacy experiences with those of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. A rubric is provided.

Extending the Lesson

Using selected slave narratives that focus on educational issues, have students work in groups of three or four to read separate narratives. They should be able to present the thoughts and intentions of the narrative to the rest of the class through a variety of formats:

- An interactive foldable flipbook with an illustrated cover depicting the enslaved person. The pages should feature elements of the person’s life, with a focus on education/literacy.
- A “talk show” interview of the enslaved person, with a panel discussion. This could be presented live, on film, or radio style.
- A written “newspaper” article on the front page of a “newspaper” with the headline “Why literacy is important to me!” Side “articles” and “advertisements” reflecting the theme and time period would be appropriate.
- Re-enact an interpretation of the life of the enslaved person, writing a brief play or screenplay using supporting evidence from the narrative.
- Create a song or poem about the narrative from another point-of-view. Have students relate the story from their point-of-view or perhaps even from the slave owner’s perspective.