

A Beacon of Light

MUSEUM CONNECTION: ART and INTELLECT

Purpose: In this lesson students will be introduced to the writings of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, a free black woman born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1825. They will examine the social issues of the time as reflected in several of her poems. Students will analyze language choices that she used to convey meaning and feeling, and they will explain how her writing is a reflection of the exemplary person that she was. A true “beacon of light,” Frances Ellen Watkins Harper made the world a better place for the African Americans of her time and continues to influence people of all races today.

Grade Level and Content Area: **E** Elementary, Social Studies

Time Frame: 2 class periods

Social Studies Standards:

- | | |
|-------------|--|
| USH 2.3.5.5 | Examine the gradual institutionalization of slavery into America, including various responses to slavery, and how slavery shaped the lives of colonists and Africans in the Americas |
| PNW 7.2.5.2 | Describe how individuals and groups have contributed to the development of cultures |

Social Studies VSC:

- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| 5.A.1.c (Grade 4) | Describe the establishment of slavery and how it shaped life in Maryland |
| 5.B.2.c (Grade 5) | Describe the different roles and viewpoints of individuals and groups, such as women, men, free and enslaved Africans, and Native Americans during the Revolutionary period |

Reading and English Language Arts VSC:

- | | |
|--------------------------|--|
| 3.A.1.b (Grades 4 and 5) | Listen to critically, read, and discuss a variety of literary forms and genres |
| 3.A.4 (Grade 4) | Use elements of poetry to facilitate understanding |
| 3.A.4 (Grade 5) | Analyze elements of poetry to facilitate understanding and interpretation |

Objective:

Students will examine Frances Ellen Watkins Harper as a free black woman and will evaluate her contributions to improving the conditions of African Americans during her time and today.

VOCABULARY AND CONCEPTS

Abolition – Abolition is putting an end to a condition, as in the abolition of slavery.

Feminist – A feminist is a person who believes in promoting equal rights and activities for women.

Morals – Morals are virtuous standards of right and wrong. Moral also refers to someone who is good in character or conduct.

Protest – To protest is to speak or act against unjust policies or conditions.

Racism – Racism is a belief that a particular race is superior and that discrimination against people of other races is appropriate behavior.

“Beacon of Light” – This is a term used to identify someone or something that is a source of hope or inspiration. (Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was a “beacon of light” for her readers.)

MATERIALS

FOR THE TEACHER:

- ☐ **Teacher Resource Sheet 1** – Acrostic Poem on Slavery
- ☐ **Teacher Resource Sheet 2** – Mrs. Frances E. W. Harper
- ☐ **Teacher Resource Sheet 3** – Title Page from *The Sparrow’s Fall*
- ☐ **Teacher Resource Sheet 4** – Slave Auction, Richmond, Virginia
- ☐ **Teacher Resource Sheet 5** – Cultivating Tobacco, Virginia, 1798

FOR THE STUDENT:

- ☐ **Student Resource Sheet 1** – “Bury Me in a Free Land”
- ☐ **Student Resource Sheet 2** – Note-Taking Guide
- ☐ **Student Resource Sheet 3** – “The Change”
- ☐ **Student Resource Sheet 4** – Brief Constructed Response
- ☐ **Student Resource Sheet 5** – “An Appeal to the American People”
- ☐ **Student Resource Sheet 6** – “The Fugitive’s Wife”
- ☐ **Student Resource Sheet 7** – “The Slave Mother”
- ☐ **Student Resource Sheet 8** – “The Dying Bondman”

RESOURCES

Foster, Frances Smith, ed. *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1990.

Foster, Frances Smith, and Darlene Clark Hine, eds. *Encyclopedia of Black Women in America: Literature*. Facts On File, 1997.

McCutcheon, Marc. *Everyday Life in the 1800s*. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1993.

Thomas, Velma Maia. *Freedom's Children: The Passage from Emancipation to the Great Migration*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2000.

Wisdom, Emma J., ed. *Poems by Frances Allen Watkins Harper*. Nashville: Post Oak Publications, 1998.

Yacovone, Donald. "Bury Me in a Free Land." *Anti-Slavery Bugle* (Nov. 20, 1858).

TEACHER BACKGROUND

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, an abolitionist, orator, journalist, novelist, essayist, feminist, Christian writer, and poet, used her many talents to fight racial injustice throughout her lifetime. Her unwavering moral character was the strong motivation behind her battles surrounding the social issues of her time including slavery, temperance, and women's rights. Because of her activism and leadership during the time of Reconstruction, some consider her to be one of the most important women in American history. Known as "The Bronze Muse," she was among the most popular African American writers of the 19th century.

Born in 1825 to a respected free black family in Baltimore, Maryland, Frances Watkins was orphaned at the age of three and was raised by her uncle, Reverend William Watkins, director of Baltimore's prestigious Academy for Negro Youth. In comparison with the overwhelming majority of black Americans of that time, Frances Ellen Watkins lived a privileged life. She attended her uncle's school where she studied the Bible, Greek, and Latin. Watkins was noted for her industry and intelligence. By the age of 14, she had acquired an education superior to that of most 19th century women of any color or class in the United States. As a teenager, she began writing poetry and, in 1845, published *Forest Leaves*, a collection of poetry. She quickly gained a reputation locally as a writer.

Although Frances Ellen Watkins had received a better education than most Blacks and Whites, when she left the Watkins Academy and began looking for employment, she felt the repressive powers of racial discrimination. She had to accept seamstress and baby-sitter jobs. She became acutely aware of the destructive nature of racial inequality and other social issues of her time.

In 1852 she accepted a teaching position at Union Seminary in Ohio and later in Pennsylvania. In 1853 she was moved to become a devout abolitionist when Maryland, her home state, passed a new law prohibiting free blacks from entering its borders. The following year, Watkins moved to Philadelphia and became active in the anti-slavery movement. During the next few years, she noted the activities and needs of fleeing slaves. This experience fueled her activism and guided her writing, and it led her to become one of the most forceful speakers on the anti-slavery lecture circuit. Her messages were so powerful that several anti-slavery societies sent her to lecture throughout New England and other states and even into Canada.

In 1854, Watkins published her second volume of poetry, *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*, which

sold about 10,000 copies. During the next several years, she published several more volumes of poetry and existing volumes were reprinted many times. By 1858, Watkins was undoubtedly one of the most famous black poets of her time. Although she was never a slave, she dedicated her life to writing poetry, books, essays, and speeches for the anti-slavery movement.

Her background in social service and leadership gave her great courage and strength to write about her feelings and to stand up for truth and what she believed to be right. She gained additional strength in her beliefs from lecturing. In her writing and speeches she chose persuasion over confrontation, and she appealed to the integrity, morality, and ethics of her listeners and readers.

In 1860 she married Fenton Harper and later gave birth to a daughter, Mary. Her husband died four years later, and Frances Harper returned to lecturing to make a living. It was at this time that Frances Ellen Watkins Harper concentrated her lectures in the South. When the Civil War ended and so many newly freed African Americans needed support, Harper shifted her focus to the social issues affecting their well-being. One of the primary issues included in her lectures was a focus on the problems affecting newly freed African American women. She strongly encouraged African American women to aim for high and lofty goals by getting an education and fighting for suffrage. She continued her writing and did not hesitate to present her opinions about rebuilding the nation (during Reconstruction) with racial unity and peace. In her later writings she gave tribute to Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, Harriet Beecher Stowe, William Lloyd Garrison, and others.

In her determination to make a difference in the world, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper worked in the Equal Rights Association with white activists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. She was also a founder of the American Woman Suffrage Association, a member of the national board of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and one of the founding members of the National Association of Colored Women. Her role in the Temperance Movement was particularly focused on the African American community. In addition to directing the "colored" branches of the Philadelphia and Pennsylvania Women's Christian Temperance Union, she became a leader of the temperance work among African Americans. Her commitment to the particular needs of African American women was never understated. In her 1892 novel, *Iola Leroy*, she tells the story of an African American woman who believes she is white because of her light skin; when she realizes she is black, she devotes her life to improving the conditions for African Americans. The book captures three major themes: personal integrity, Christian service, and social equality, the same three themes that apparently guided Harper's life. Indeed, they are present in one of her last "activist" roles—the 1893 criticism of the World's Congress of Representative Women for "ignoring black women."

This free African American, born into a family of opportunities and privileges, chose to dedicate her talents to improve the lives of others. Her influence and impact are still felt today.

LESSON DEVELOPMENT

1. **Motivation:** Discuss a social issue of today such as homelessness. Explain that slaves who escaped or those who were suddenly freed also faced this situation. Discuss the social issues surrounding the time of slavery in the 1800s. Discuss the terrible emotional and physical conditions for the enslaved African Americans. Have students assist you in creating an acrostic poem about slavery (see **Teacher Resource Sheet 1**, Acrostic Poem on Slavery).
2. Review or pre-teach elements of poetry such as mood.
3. Review vocabulary, especially the term “Beacon of Light.”
4. Write “Frances Ellen Watkins Harper” in large letters on the chalkboard. Tell students that she was a woman who wanted her message heard. Tell the children that she is a good example of a “Beacon of Light.” Refer back again to the vocabulary term, “Beacon of Light.” Display **Teacher Resource Sheet 2**, Mrs. Francis E. W. Harper, and **Teacher Resource Sheet 3**, Title Page from *The Sparrow’s Fall*. Point out that Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was born in 1825, almost two centuries ago.
5. Discuss an important social issue of Harper’s time, such as the abolition of slavery (**Teacher Resource Sheets 4 and 5**).
6. Discuss Harper’s life as a writer and public speaker and her passion for civil rights. She lived the life she preached: Christian, moral, compassionate, and loving. Remind the students that this poem was written in 1858, just three years before the Civil War began.
7. Give each student a copy of **Student Resource Sheet 1**, “Bury Me in a Free Land.” Set the purpose for reading by asking students: What does her work say about the social conditions of her time? What are some words and phrases that evoke meaning and feeling? What does her work say about her?
8. Display and read aloud **Student Resource Sheet 1**, “Bury Me in a Free Land.” (Display **Teacher Resource Sheets 4 and 5**.) Read the poem slowly with feeling.
9. Read the poem aloud again while students read along. After reading, summarize the poem; make connections to the terms “abolition” and “racism.” Reread the images of fearful gloom, wild despair, human prey, and his galling chain. Have students highlight all the negative words in the poem. Help the students connect the mood of the poem, which is the utter sadness of the times. Have students take notes in the first and second columns of **Student Resource Sheet 2**, Note-Taking Guide. (Save column 3 for step 13.)
10. Distribute a copy of **Student Resource Sheet 3**, “The Change,” to each student, or select a poem from **Student Resource Sheets 5-8**. As you read the selected poem to the class ask students to think about elements of poetry that they know. After reading the poem, have the class discuss in order the elements of poetry (i.e., rhyming couplet, stanzas, personifi-

cation, etc.).

11. Instruct the students to work in cooperative groups to complete the bottom half of **Student Resource Sheet 2** for the selected poem.
12. After all the groups have finished, each group should share their interpretation with the class.
13. Have students decide what this work says about Frances Ellen Watkins Harper as a person. Have them write notes to express their ideas in the third column of **Student Resource Sheet 2**. Remind the students to that Frances Ellen Watkins Harper can be considered a “Beacon of Light.” Ask individuals to share their ideas when everyone is finished.
14. **Assessment:** Distribute **Student Resource Sheet 4**, Brief Constructed Response. Students should respond individually to the following prompt:
Frances Ellen Watkins Harper can be described as “A Beacon of Light.” Write a paragraph to explain why this description is true.
 - Include details from her poetry about the social conditions of her time.
 - Explain what her poetry says about her.
15. **Closure:** Have a class discussion about the following:
 - What talents (writing skills, leadership skills, oratory skills, protest skills, interpersonal skills, etc.) did Frances Ellen Watkins Harper use to get her message across to the public?
 - How did she use her talents on behalf of others?

THOUGHTFUL APPLICATIONS

- Today we see people who choose to make a difference with their lives. For example, prominent African Americans today feel the need to reach back into the community. What are some examples of this that you see today?
- One person can make a huge difference by improving the quality of life for an entire nation, as in the case of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. Ask students: How can you use your talents to make your community a better place to live? How can you encourage others to join you?

LESSON EXTENSIONS

- Frances Ellen Watkins Harper has a prominent place in the “Freedom Writers” exhibit of the Reginald F. Lewis Museum’s “The Strength of the Mind” gallery. Short biographies of other women poets and examples of their poetry can be explored here. This experience may inspire students to compose their own biography or poem by stepping into the shoes of an African American child and back into a chosen period of

the nation's history. The students should be sure to explore exhibits in the museum's "The Strength of the Mind" gallery.

- Investigate another author who tried to improve the conditions of the time, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe.
- Read other poems, essays, letters, speeches, and fiction in the book, *A Brighter Coming Day*. Learn how Frances Ellen Watkins Harper not only helped elevate and inspire African Americans, but also how she changed the way we live today.
- Use a poem as the subject matter for a calligraphy project in art class. Each of the title letters would be illuminated.
- Use the Internet to research Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's life and accomplishments. Have students read portions of her life on the morning announcements at your school. November would be a good month to remind people of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's fight for women's right to vote.
- Plan a public display of the finished poems at a library, church, bank, or business.

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Acrostic Poem on Slavery

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper used her talents as a prolific writer to fight injustice throughout her lifetime. Create an acrostic poem that expresses your feelings and thoughts about the evils of slavery.

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Sold for Gold

Labor for Free

Always Hopeful

Victorious in Spirit

Equal to Property

Rights Taken Away

Yearning for Freedom

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Mrs. Frances E. W. Harper



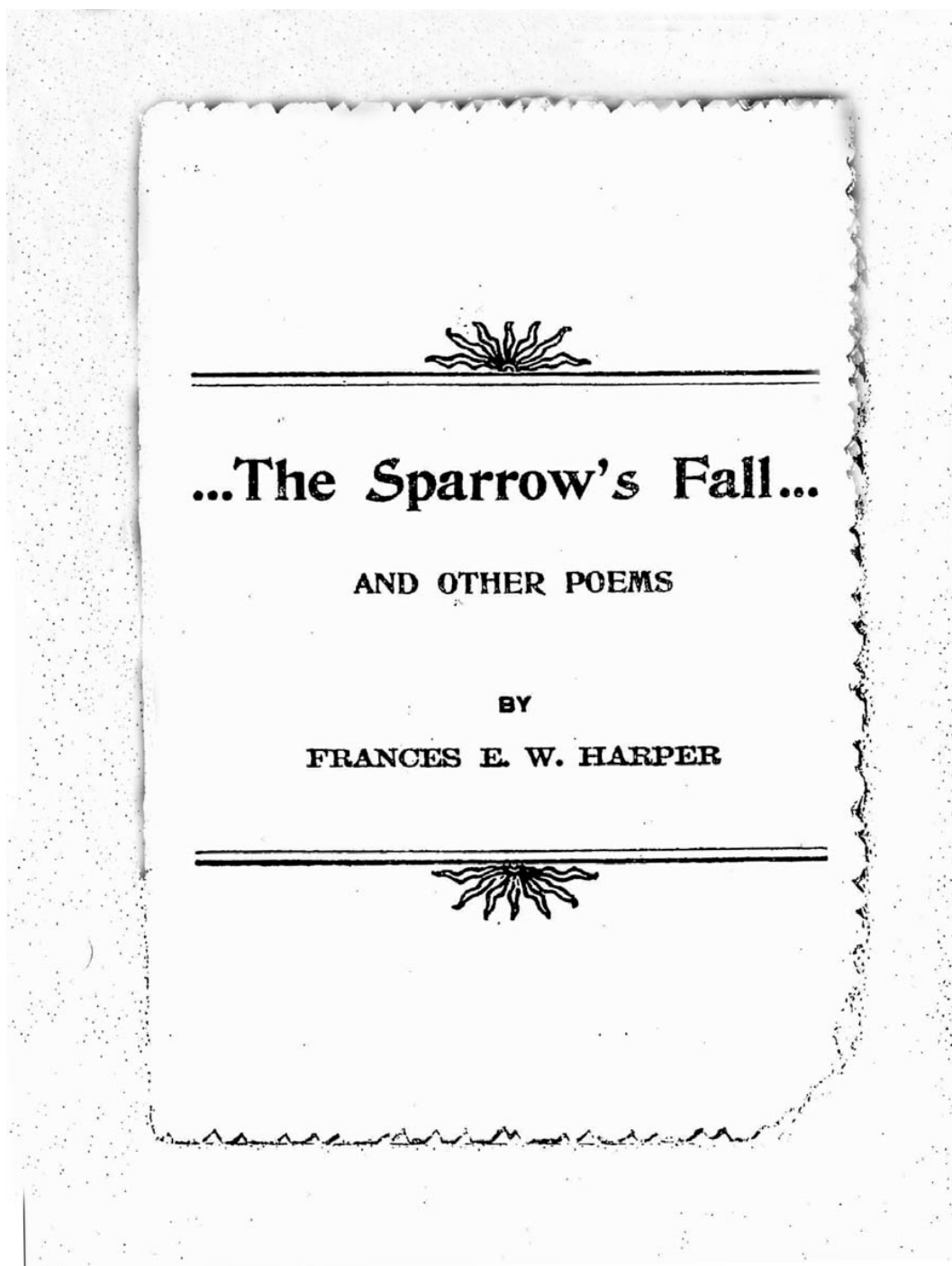
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FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS HARPER
Poet and Impressive Lecturer

Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [LC-USZ62-75978].

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Title Page from *The Sparrow's Fall*



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Slave Auction, Richmond, Virginia

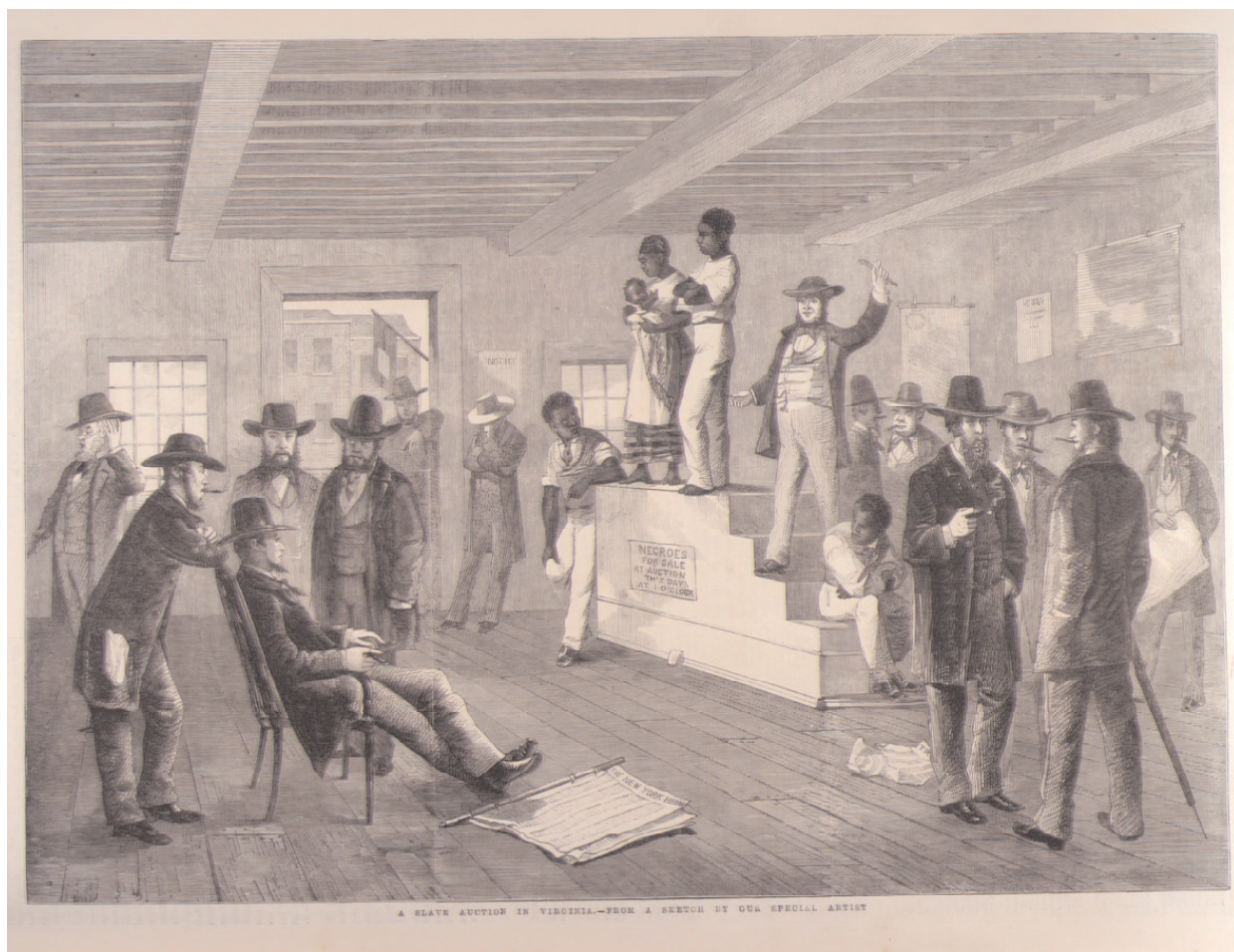


Illustration from *The Illustrated London News*, Vol. 38 (February 16, 1861), p. 139.

From "The Atlantic Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Americas: A Visual Record," by Jerome S. Handler and Michael L. Tuite Jr., an online exhibition <http://hitchcock.its.virginia.edu/Slavery/>.

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Cultivating Tobacco, Virginia, 1798



An Overseer Doing his Duty. Drawing by Benjamin Henry Latrobe
(Sketchbook, Ill. 33, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, Maryland).

From "The Atlantic Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Americas: A Visual Record," by Jerome S. Handler and Michael L. Tuite Jr., an online exhibition available at <http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/>.

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“Bury Me in a Free Land”

By Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

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 could not rest, if around my grave
I heard the steps of a trembling slave;
His shadow above my silent tomb
Would make it a place of fearful gloom.

I could not sleep, if I heard the tread
Of a coffin-gang to the shambles led,
And the mother's shriek of wild despair
Rise, like a curse, on the trembling air.

I could not rest if I saw the lash
Drinking her blood at each fearful gash;
And I saw her babes torn from her breast,
Like trembling doves from their parent nest.

I'd shudder and start, if I heard the bay
Of a bloodhound seizing his human prey;
And I heard the captive plead in vain,
As they bound, afresh, his galling chain.

If I saw young girls from their mother's arms
Bartered and sold for their youthful charms,
My eye would flash with a mournful flame,
My death-pale cheek grow red with shame.

I would sleep, dear friends, where bloated Might
Can rob no man of his dearest right;
My rest shall be calm in any grave
Where none calls his brother a slave.

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 the land of slaves!*

From *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*, edited by Frances Smith Foster (New York: The Feminist Press, 1990), p. 177-178.

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Note-Taking Guide

Title of Poem: **“Bury Me in a Free Land”**

Social Issues	Words and Phrases	Francis E. W. Harper

Title of Poem: “_____”

Social Issues	Words and Phrases	Francis E. W. Harper

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“The Change”

By Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

The blue sky arching overhead,
The green turf 'neath my daily tread,
All glorified by freedom's light,
Grow fair and lovely to my sight.

The very winds that sweep along
Seemed burdened with a lovely song,
Nor shrieks nor groans of grief or fear,
Float on their wings and pain my ear.

No more with dull and aching breast,
Roused by the horn—I rise from rest
Content and cheerful with my lot,
I greet the sun and leave my cot.

For darling child and loving wife
I toil with newly waken'd life;
The light that lingers round her smile
The shadows from my soul beguile.

The prattle of my darling boy
Fills my old heart with untold joy;
Before his laughter, mirth and song
Fade out long scores of grief and wrong.

Oh, never did the world appear
So lovely to my eye and ear,
'Till Freedom came, with Joy and Peace,
And bade my hateful bondage cease!

From *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*, edited by Frances Smith Foster (New York: The Feminist Press, 1990), p. 183-184.

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Brief Constructed Response

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper can be described as “A Beacon of Light.” Write a paragraph to explain why this description is true.

- Include details from her poetry about the social conditions of her time.
- Explain what her poetry says about her.

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“An Appeal to the American People”
by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

When a dark and fearful strife
Raged around the nation’s life,
And the traitor plunged his steel
Where your quivering hearts could feel,
When your cause did need a friend,
We were faithful to the end.

When we stood with bated breath,
Facing fiery storms of death,
And the war-cloud, red with wrath,
Fiercely swept around our path,
Did our hearts with terror quail?
Or our courage ever fail?

When the captive, wanting bread,
Sought our poor and lowly shed,
And the blood-hounds missed his way,
Did we e’er his path betray?
Filled we not his heart with trust
As we shared with him our crust?

With your soldiers, side by side,
Helped we turn the battle’s tide,
Till o’er ocean, stream and shore,
Waved the rebel flag no more,
And above the rescued sod
Praises rose to freedom’s God.

But to-day the traitor stands
With the crimson on his hands,
Scowling ‘neath his brow of hate,
On our weak and desolate,
With the blood-rust on the knife
Aimed at the nation’s life.

Asking you to weakly yield,
All we won upon the field,
To ignore, on land and flood,
All the offerings of our blood,
And to write above our slain
“They have fought and died in vain.”

To your manhood we appeal,
Lest the traitor’s iron heel
Grind and trample in the dust
All our new-born hope and trust,
And the name of freedom be
Linked with bitter mockery.

From *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*, edited by Frances Smith Foster (New York: The Feminist Press, 1990), p. 167-168.

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“The Fugitive’s Wife”
by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

It was my sad and weary lot
To toil in slavery;
But one thing cheered my lowly cot—
My husband was with me.

One evening, as our children played
Around our cabin door,
I noticed on his brow a shade
I’d never seen before;

And in his eyes a gloomy night
Of anguish and despair;—
I gazed upon their troubled light,
To read the meaning there.

He strained me to his heaving heart—
My own beat wild with fear;
I knew not, but I sadly felt
There must be evil near.

He vainly strove to cast aside
The tears that fell like rain;—
Too frail, indeed, is manly pride,
To strive with grief and pain.

Again he clasped me to his breast,
And said that we must part:
I tried to speak—but, oh! it seemed
An arrow reached my heart.

“Bear not,” I cried, “unto your grave,
The yoke you’ve born from birth;
No longer live a helpless slave,
The meanest thing on earth!”

From *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*, edited by Frances Smith Foster (New York: The Feminist Press, 1990), p. 72-73.

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“The Slave Mother”
by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

Heard you that shriek? It rose
So wildly on the air,
It seemed as if a burden'd heart
Was breaking in despair.

Saw you those hands so sadly clasped—
The bowed and feeble head—
The shuddering of that fragile form—
That look of grief and dread?

Saw you the sad, imploring eye?
Its every glance was pain,
As if a storm of agony
Were sweeping through the brain.

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!

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

His love has been a joyous light
That o'er her pathway smiled,
A fountain gushing ever new,
Amid life's desert wild.

His lightest word has been a tone
Of music round her heart,
Their lives a streamlet blent in one—
Oh, Father! must they part?

They tear him from her circling arms,
Her last and fond embrace.
Oh! never more may her sad eyes
Gaze on his mournful face.

No marvel, then, these bitter shrieks
Disturb the listening air:
She is a mother, and her heart
Is breaking in despair.

From *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*, edited by Frances Smith Foster (New York: The Feminist Press, 1990), p. 58-59.

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“The Dying Bondman”
by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

Life was trembling, faintly trembling
On the bondman’s latest breath,
And he felt the chilling pressure
Of the cold, hard hand of Death.

He had been an Afric chieftain,
Worn his manhood as a crown;
But upon the field of battle
Had been fiercely stricken down.

He had longed to gain his freedom,
Waited, watched and hoped in vain,
Till his life was slowly ebbing—
Almost broken was his chain.

By his bedside stood the master,
Gazing on the dying one,
Knowing by the dull grey shadows
That life’s sands were almost run.

“Master,” said the dying bondman,
“Home and friends I soon shall see;

But before I reach my country,
Master write that I am free;

“For the spirits of my fathers
Would shrink back from me in pride,
If I told them at our greeting
I a slave had lived and died;—

Give to me the precious token,
That my kindred dead may see—
Master! write it, write it quickly!
Master! write that I am free!”

At his earnest plea the master
Wrote for him the glad release,
O’er his wan and wasted features
Flitted one sweet smile of peace.

Eagerly he grasped the writing;
“I am free!” at last he said.
Backward fell upon the pillow
He was free among the dead.

From *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Reader*, edited by Frances Smith Foster (New York: The Feminist Press, 1990), p. 348-349.

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