

The Poems of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper: Exploring Themes in Slavery- and Emancipation-Era Protest Poetry

Museum Connection: Art and Enlightenment

Purpose: In this lesson students will read two Frances Ellen Watkins Harper poems, “Lines” and “Songs for the People,” to discuss how her use of imagery and literary devices develops tone and meaning and will explore how the themes in her poems resonate in the lives of African Americans today.

Course: English, grades 9-12

Time Frame: 2-3 lessons

Correlation to State Standards:

- 1.1.4: Apply knowledge of content-specific and other technical vocabulary (literary terms)
- 1.2.2: Determine, explain, and/or extend ideas and issues of a text that may have implications for readers or contemporary society
- 2.1.2: Analyze the effect of poetic and stylistic elements on meaning
- 3.1.1: Compose effective informative or expository texts (literary analysis)

Common Core State Reading Standards for Literature 6-12

- RL4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)
- RL10: By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 11-CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently.

Objective(s):

- Students will discuss Harper’s use of literary/rhetorical devices in her poems in order to analyze the development of tone and meaning.
- Students will write an essay analyzing one of Harper’s poems for literary/rhetorical devices, tone, and meaning.

Vocabulary and Concepts:

Vocabulary word	Definition
portal (noun)	a doorway, gateway, or entrance
rend (verb)	to tear, pull, or rip with violence
smite (verb)	to strike or attack with a powerful and disastrous effect
quailing (verb)	drawing back in fear; cowering
festooned (verb)	to adorn or hang
sublime (adjective)	noble, majestic, awe-inspiring
blight (noun)	anything that destroys or prevents growth; a person or thing that withers hope and ambition
ensign (noun)	a flag or banner
sabre (noun)	a sword
carnage (noun)	bloody and extensive slaughter
strife (noun)	a struggle or conflict
discord (noun)	disagreement, dissension
girdle (verb)	to surround or encircle
Literary/Rhetorical Devices	Definition
imagery	the use of vivid or figurative language that addresses the senses and represents an object, action, or idea.
metaphor	a comparison between two unlike things.
personification	giving human characteristics to inanimate objects.
anaphora	the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses, or lines.
metonymy	something closely associated with the subject is substituted for the subject itself.
synecdoche	a part of something used to represent the whole.
allusion	a reference to something in history or literature.
periodic sentence	a sentence in which the main idea (subject and verb) comes last.
rhetorical question	a question that is not necessarily meant to be answered, but instead makes the reader think.

Materials:

For the Teacher:

Teacher Resource Sheet 1: “Lines” Analysis Worksheet with sample responses

Teacher Resource Sheet 2: “Songs for the People” Analysis Worksheet with sample responses

For the Student:

Student Resource Sheet 1: “Lines” poem

Teacher Resource Sheet 2: “Lines” Analysis Worksheet

Teacher Resource Sheet 3: “Songs for the People” poem

Teacher Resource Sheet 4: “Songs for the People” Analysis Worksheet

Teacher Resource Sheet 5: Analysis Essay Prompt

Resources:

Publications:

Foster, Frances Smith, “Frances Ellen Watkins Harper” in *Black Women in America*. Second Edition. Vol. 2 Edited by Darlene Clark Hine. Oxford U P, 2005.

Foster, Frances Smith, ed. *A Brighter Day Coming: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*. 1990.

Shirley Wilson Logan, *We Are Coming”; The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Black Women*. Southern Illinois UP, 1999.

Shirley Wilson Logan, *With Pen and Voice: A Critical Anthology of Nineteenth-Century African-American Women*. Southern Illinois UP, 1995.

Web Sites:

<http://voices.cla.umn.edu/artistpages/watkinsFrances.php> --The University of Minnesota “Voices from the Gaps” Project, provides an extensive biography and criticism of some of her poems

www.poemhunter.com/frances-ellen-watkins/biography/ --a database of poets and their works

www.poemhunter.com/poem/songs-for-the-people/

www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=182616 --an independent literary organization that also publishes *Poetry* magazine.

Historical Background:

Frances Ellen Watkins was born on September 24, 1825 in Baltimore, Maryland to free parents. When Frances was only three years old, her mother died which left her as an orphan. She was raised and educated by her uncle, William Watkins, who founded and taught at the Academy for Negro Youth, a Baltimore school for free black children. At fourteen years old and finished with her formal education, Frances worked as a seamstress and babysitter for the Armstrong family in Baltimore. The family gave her access to their personal library in the family home, and to the bookstore they owned and operated; consequently, she developed an interest in literature and poetry. As she herself wrote poetry, Harper relied heavily on biblical references when writing about social and political issues. At the age of twenty-one, Harper published her first book of poetry and prose, Forest Leaves (1845). When she was 25 years old, she became the first female faculty member at Union Seminary in Columbus, OH. Her rise to this position was met with much resistance, but Frances had the steadfast support of the president of the Seminary, the Reverend John M. Brown.

Her adult years were consumed by a passion for African-American rights, women's rights, and the anti-slavery movement; her writing greatly reflects these causes. Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects, published in 1854 (enlarged in 1857), was released as Harper was helping with the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia, PA; she donated many of the proceeds from book sales to the Underground Railroad movement. She went on to become a lecturer for the Maine Anti-Slavery Society.

In 1860 Frances married Fenton Harper (a widower), and they had one daughter named Mary (who died at a young age); Fenton died unexpectedly just four years after their marriage. Frances was forced to travel the lecture circuit again after the death of her husband to financially sustain herself and her daughter. Frances became one of the most eloquent and influential abolitionist lecturers, with a reputation of being able to galvanize her audience towards working for social reform. She also developed strong ties with others working for the feminist movement, such as Susan B. Anthony. A noted suffragist, Frances Harper spoke at the 1866 National Women's Rights Convention in New York. In addition to publishing Moses: A Story of the Nile in 1869, Poems in 1871; 1985, Sketches of Southern Life in 1872; 1896 and several articles in the Christian Recorder, the New National Era, and the Philadelphia Press, Frances Harper (referred to as the "bronze muse") remained active in various abolitionist, women's temperance, and suffrage organizations. Harper's travels on the lecture circuit as a public speaker for women's rights and the abolition of slavery and her extensive writing on these subjects earned her the title "First African-American Protest Poet."

In 1892 Harper released her only novel, Iola Leroy: Or, Shadows Uplifted, which is one of the first novels published by a black woman. During the last 18 years of her life, Harper continued publishing books of her poetry with Atlanta Offering: Poems (1895), Poems (1895) Idylls of the Bible and The Sparrow's Fall and Other Poems (c. 1894), as well as participating in the First Congress of Colored Women, the National Federation of Afro-American Women, and the Colored Women's League. One of the most noted black poets, lecturers, and writers of the nineteenth century; her books of poetry and prose were reprinted several times. She died on February 22, 1911 from heart disease, and is buried in Philadelphia, PA. For more biographic

information, go to <http://voices.cla.umn.edu/artistpages/watkinsFrances.php> or http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frances_Harper

Lesson Development:

Prior to Lesson: Instruct each student to bring in a personally inspiring song and its lyrics.

Motivation: Think about a time when your country, your state, or even your own family experienced a crisis. How did you feel at this point? How did the people in leadership positions act during this crisis? Was the crisis successfully diffused or thwarted? Did the situation become worse?

Is our country today at a crisis or a turning point? What do you predict the outcome will be? Are you hopeful or despairing?

1. Students will read “Lines” by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper with the following focus question: In your own words, what is the crisis that Harper addresses in her poem? (**STUDENT RESOURCE SHEET 1**)
2. Students will discuss their thoughts about the focus question, utilizing their prior knowledge of slavery and free blacks in America.
3. Students will discuss specific details of the poem by answering the following questions:
 - What are the three personified characters in this poem?
 - Summarize the situation in this poem. Use the definitions of the vocabulary words to help you envision the situation. To which character do the pronouns “he” and “his” in stanzas 4-6 refer? (answer: Slavery) How many “sections” does this poem have to explain the situation? (answer: 4 sections—stanzas 1-3, stanzas 4-6, stanza 7, and stanzas 8-9) Label the sections of the poem.
 - Lines 13 and 27 use an epithet to describe Future: “pale and trembling Future.” Create an epithet for Slavery based on lines 3 and 14. (answer: hateful Slavery)
 - What images show the hatred of Slavery? Are these images effective?
 - What is the effect of waiting until the last two stanzas to introduce the first person pronouns “us,” “our,” and “we”?
 - Poetry is never static; it moves forward or contains a shift in thought. As this poem moves through its many sections to develop the situation, explain the movement or shifts in this poem. Does it come to a conclusion?
 - Consider the questions Harper poses in the last two stanzas. If you were Crisis, how would you respond to these questions?
 - What is the significance of the title?
4. Once students understand the situation described in the poem, students will work in groups of 3 or 4 to complete the “Lines” Analysis Worksheet (**STUDENT RESOURCE SHEET 2**).
5. Student groups will share responses from their charts and discuss the effects of the devices, the tone, and the meaning. See possible answers (**TEACHER RESOURCE SHEET 1**).

6. Transition to the second poem by explaining that while “Lines” has a tone that is foreboding, threatening, and subversive, “Songs for the People” has a markedly different tone. Note: Students should have brought their own inspiring songs and lyrics to class by this time.
7. Students will first read “Songs for the People” silently; then they will form a circle to read the poem aloud with each student reading a line; finally they will read the poem aloud a second time in their circle, this time stressing one word in their line that conveys a positive thought. After this reading activity, ask students what the tone of the poem is (answer: comforting, inspiring). Hearing the poem read aloud and hearing which words they stressed in their lines should help them decipher a positive tone. (**STUDENT RESOURCE SHEET 3**)
8. Students will examine the title of the poem and discuss the songs that they brought to school: songs that inspire and motivate them, songs that relax and soothe them, and songs that evoke a sense of pride. Discuss why these songs have this effect. Play some of the songs and discuss the inspirational or soothing aspects of the music and the lyrics.
9. Explain that although Harper is labeled an African-American protest poet, this poem, “Songs for the People,” is not reminiscent of typical protest songs that rouse the oppressed to fight for their cause. She specifically describes four kinds of songs of a different nature. With a partner, students will complete “Songs for the People” Analysis Worksheet (**STUDENT RESOURCE SHEET 4**).
10. Students will share responses from their worksheet with the class to discuss the imagery and the tone. See sample responses (**TEACHER RESOURCE SHEET 2**).
11. Students will revisit the last two stanzas, which indicate that songs can heal a worn, weary, war-torn world and instill peace in the hearts of men. Have students respond to this claim using the four corners activity: students walk to one corner of the classroom, each corner representing whether they agree, disagree, somewhat agree, or somewhat disagree with the claim. Once in their chosen corner, the group of students must discuss and write their reasons for choosing that stance. Students will then share their reasons in a class discussion.
12. Students will write an analysis essay on one of Harper’s poems (**STUDENT RESOURCE SHEET 5**).

Assessment:

Have students select one of the two poems studied in this lesson to write a well-organized essay that analyzes how Harper uses literary/rhetorical devices to develop tone and meaning.

Closure:

Engage students in a discussion of how the crisis has changed in modern times for African-Americans. Could a particular song alleviate the strife today?

Thoughtful Application(s):

- “Lines” may be used with poems about any other crisis or turning point in time. Compare each poem’s treatment of the subject to evaluate which is more effective.
- Compare Harper’s “Songs for the People” with Elizabeth Alexander’s “Praise Song for the Day” (Obama’s Inauguration Poem).
- Use “Songs for the People” as an introduction to teaching African Spirituals, field songs, or The Blues, all examples of music that expresses the hopes, wisdom, and struggles of African-Americans. A unit on this topic might include scenes from August Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* or passages from Sterling Brown’s “The Blues as Folk Poetry.”
- This lesson may be used with pre-Civil War history lessons to show both the hope and despair of enslaved and free African-Americans during this era.

Lesson Extension(s):

- The Museum offers several school programs that connect to the curriculum lessons.
 - *Journey in History Theater and Living History to Go* provide living history and theatrical performances which highlight African Americans in the museum’s gallery.
 - Take the theme tour, *Paths to Freedom* and explore the story of slavery through the eyes of enslaved and free blacks from Maryland’s colonial past to the end of the Civil War.
 - Contact group reservations for schedule updates.
- Have students visit the Reginald F. Lewis Museum with other Harper poems in hand, such as “The Slave Mother,” “Bury Me in a Free Land,” “The Slave Auction,” “The Fugitive’s Wife” and “Learning to Read.” Visit the exhibition area, *A Market in America* in *Things Hold*, *Lines Connect Gallery* to examine the quilt, *They Sold Nettie Down South*, the slave pen and narratives about Maryland fugitives Charles Ball and Samuel Denson. Have students make connections between her poems and the exhibits.
- Ask students what the portal, doorway, or entrance to their future or our country’s future looks like. Have them either draw a doorway or find an image on Google Images that represents the entrance to their future or to our country’s future. Write a paragraph explaining the details of the entryway and what they believe the future holds. When visiting the Lewis Museum, compare the doorway from their images to the gate (found near the tobacco exhibit) at the entrance to the exhibits at the Lewis Museum.
- Invite parents or grandparents of students to visit and share stories of a time in their lives when they were faced with a moment of crisis that affected their lives as African-Americans.
- Consider when each attitude or tone (negative and positive) is important and/or appropriate to express the African American experience. List images and stories from the Lewis Museum that display both attitudes.

- Find the display about Harper in the Lewis Museum. Read and learn more about her background. How does this information provide added insight into these two poems? Which poem most clearly reflects her own life?
- Choose one kind of song Harper describes in “Songs for the People” and write the lyrics and/or music for it as you envision it.

STUDENT RESOURCE SHEET 1

Lines by Frances Ellen Watkins

For resource,

Open Hyperlink below

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=182616>

STUDENT RESOURCE SHEET 2

“Lines” Analysis Worksheet

Literary/rhetorical device	Example with line number citation	Effect	What is the overall tone of the poem?
metaphor			
personification			
anaphora			
metonymy			
synecdoche			
allusion			
periodic sentence			
rhetorical question			

In 1-2 sentences, write the meaning of Harper’s poem “Lines.”

TEACHER RESOURCE SHEET 1

“Lines” Analysis Worksheet

Literary/rhetorical device	Example with line number citation	Effect/Explanation	What is the overall tone of the poem?
metaphor	“Every jewel was a life-drop” (23).	Comparing the jewels in Slavery’s helmet with drops of blood highlights the precious value of life and the cruelty of Slavery.	foreboding, threatening, and subversive
personification	Slavery is personified by speaking violent thoughts and by having a hand holding a banner and a brow wearing a helmet, both covered with others’ blood(4-24).	The reader sees Slavery as a tyrant.	
anaphora	“Room to...” (5-11).	The anaphora is part of an imperative, so the reader sees Slavery as commanding. He repeatedly demands to be given plenty of opportunities for violent acts, making him seem bloodthirsty and unrelenting.	
metonymy	“manhood” is substituted for black men collectively (9)	The entire line suggests that Slavery will emasculate all black men.	
synecdoche	“poor broken heart” represents a person (24)	Lines 23-24 suggest that people died violently literally and figuratively in slavery (their blood was	

		“wrung” from their “poor broken heart”).	
allusion	“Eden,” a biblical allusion (11)	The implication is that Paradise, the Garden of Eden, will never exist in times of slavery. All happiness and bliss will drown in slavery’s “lava-tide.”	
periodic sentence	“Though her cheek...Crisis of our time” (25-28).	The reader has delayed knowledge that this anxious and yet sublime figure is Crisis.	
rhetorical question	“What shall be our country’s doom?” (32)	The rhetorical question forces the reader to consider all dire possibilities (“doom”) of this crisis.	

In 1-2 sentences, write the meaning of Harper’s poem “Lines.”

After experiencing years of slavery, the people now view themselves at a turning point, a nexus of sorts: they wonder “Will our country enter its future still in the bonds of slavery?” Because of violent, bloody images and a threatening, foreboding tone, the future is not hopeful.

STUDENT RESOURCE SHEET 3

Songs for the People
By Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

For resource,

Open Hyperlink below

<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/songs-for-the-people/>

STUDENT RESOURCE SHEET 4

“Songs for the People” Analysis Worksheet

Directions: Complete the chart below on the song imagery in the poem.

Song Imagery with line number citations	Explanation/interpretation	What is the overall tone of the poem?
an invigorating battle-cry to galvanize all people (1-8)		
a relaxing and soothing ballad (9-12)		
a child’s sweet anthem (13-16)		
an ode to a happy, majestic home (17-20)		

In 1-2 sentences, write the meaning of Harper’s “Songs for the People.”

TEACHER RESOURCE SHEET 2

“Songs for the People” Analysis Worksheet

Directions: Complete the chart below on the song imagery in the poem.

Song Imagery with line number citations	Explanation/interpretation	What is the overall tone of the poem?
an invigorating battle-cry to galvanize all people (1-8)	This type of song would evoke not a battlefield where men’s lives are destroyed, but a place to live life to the fullest. The battle-cry encourages people to rise to their highest potential.	inspiring, hopeful, soothing, comforting
a relaxing and soothing ballad (9-12)	This ballad would sooth the anxious, who have a knotted or furrowed brow, and enable them to live in bliss.	
a child’s sweet anthem (13-16)	This anthem would teach a child of his obligation to be loving and obedient, and thereby avoid life’s pitfalls (“float o’er life’s highway”) or at least deal with life’s adversities with grace.	
an ode to a happy, majestic home (17-20)	This ode would chronicle no sorrow for the poor and aged (“no night”), but only sunshine (“bright”) in a dwelling that connotes peace and happiness.	

In 1-2 sentences, write the meaning of Harper’s “Songs for the People.”

The speaker of this poem desires to soothe, refresh, and inspire those who experience strife. The speaker wishes that people would use their loving hearts to bestow peace unto others.

STUDENT RESOURCE SHEET 5

Choose one of the following extension activities:

Analysis Essay Prompt

Select one of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's poems, either "Lines" or "Songs for the People." Write a well-organized essay that analyzes how Harper uses literary/rhetorical devices to develop tone and meaning in the poem. Be sure to indicate why this tone is appropriate and effective in developing this message.

Comparison of Harper's Poems

Harper's two poems were written in response to the oppression of slavery. In a well-written essay, compare and contrast the two poems, taking into consideration the poetic techniques Harper uses in each.

Analysis of a Song

Analyze a song of your choice using the literary device chart on STUDENT RESOURCE SHEET B.