

# Changemakers: Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

*This inquiry is adapted from material created by Jennifer Suchland, Ph.D., The Ohio State University.*

## Compelling Question

Why should we listen to marginalized voices from the past?

### State Standard(s)

Ohio/Grade 8/ History Content Statements 1,14,18, 20,21  
Kentucky/8.I.Q.2, 8.C.RR.1, 8.H.CH.2, 8.I.CC.1

### C3 Framework Indicator(s)

D1.5.6-8, D2.His.3.6-8, D3.3.6-8, D4.3.6-8

### Learning Goals

#### Students will understand

- The benefits of annotating texts.
- The historical value of poetry, short stories, and speeches.
- Harper's contributions to our understanding of history.
- The challenges of being free, Black, and female in the 1800s.
- The importance of listening to marginalized voices of the past.

#### Students will be able to

- Annotate a text.
- Identify historical information in poetry, short stories, and speeches.
- Create an argument based on reasoning.
- Represent how Harper inspires them through a visual and/or textual collage.

### Supporting Question

Why is Frances Ellen Watkins Harper significant to history?

### Featured Sources

- **Text:** Zinn Education Project (2022). *April 14, 1875: Frances Harper on Grassroots Organizing...*

### Supporting Question

How does annotating literature improve your understanding?

### Featured Sources

- **Primary source:** Watkins Harper, F. E. (1895). *Songs for the People*. Poets.org. [poets.org/poem/songs-people](https://poets.org/poem/songs-people)

### Supporting Question

What does the life and work of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper teach us about being free, Black, and female in the 1800s?

### Featured Sources

- **Primary source:** Watkins Harper, F. E. (1866, May). *We Are All Bound Up Together*. Iowa State...

## Featured Sources (cont.)

...*During Reconstruction*.  
[zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/frances-harper-grassroots-organizing-reconstruction](http://zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/frances-harper-grassroots-organizing-reconstruction)

- **Primary Sources:** Black Women's Suffrage (n.d.). *Search results for Frances Ellen Watkins Harper*. [blackwomenssuffrage.dp.la/search?tags=blackwomenssuffragefrances ellen watkins harper](http://blackwomenssuffrage.dp.la/search?tags=blackwomenssuffragefrances%20ellen%20watkins%20harper)
- **Text:** Waite, P. (n.d.). Frances Ellen Watkins harper. [coloredconventions.org/ohio-organizing/biographies/frances-ellen-watkins-harper](http://coloredconventions.org/ohio-organizing/biographies/frances-ellen-watkins-harper)
- **Text:** Black Women's Suffrage. (n.d.). *Frances Ellen Watkins Harper*. Colored Convention Project. [blackwomenssuffrage.dp.la/key-figures/francesEllenWatkinsHarper](http://blackwomenssuffrage.dp.la/key-figures/francesEllenWatkinsHarper)
- **Text:** Considerations for Women in 19th Century United States (Appendix A)
- **Video:** (4:51) Columbus Neighborhoods (2019, May 2). *Frances Ellen Watkins Harper*. PBS. [pbs.org/video/frances-ellen-watkins-harper-torahu](http://pbs.org/video/frances-ellen-watkins-harper-torahu)

## Formative Performance Task

- Exit slip

## Featured Sources (cont.)

## Formative Performance Task

- Annotation of *Songs for the People*

## Featured Sources (cont.)

- ... University Archives of Women's Political Communication. [awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/21/we-are-all-bound-up-together-may-1866](http://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/21/we-are-all-bound-up-together-may-1866) (print friendly version)
- **Video Reenactment:** Women & the American Story. (n.d.) Resource: All Bound Up Together. New-York Historical Society Museum and Library. [wams.nyhistory.org/a-nation-divided/reconstruction/all-bound-up-together](http://wams.nyhistory.org/a-nation-divided/reconstruction/all-bound-up-together) (video reenactment, transcript, teacher resources)
- **Primary Source:** "The Two Offers" (Appendix B)
- **Primary Source:** Poetry Foundation (n.d.). Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. [poetryfoundation.org/poets/frances-ellen-watkins-harper](http://poetryfoundation.org/poets/frances-ellen-watkins-harper) (includes links to poems)
- Student selected primary sources

## Formative Performance Task

- Chart of findings
- Annotated texts

## Summative Performance Task

**ARGUMENT:** Today, we can study many different primary and secondary sources to learn about the past. So, why is it important to seek out and learn from those who were marginalized? What do their stories have to offer our understanding of history? Create a 1-minute video conveying your argument and reasoning.

## Summative Performance Task

**EXTENSION:** Why should literature, such as short stories and poetry, be valued as historical texts?

## Taking Informed Action

**UNDERSTAND:** Literary Legacies Project. Think about how there is a connection between the past, present and future. We are connected to people in the past and in the future, others will be connected to us, and through us to others in the past.

**ASSESS:** Consider how Frances Ellen Watkins Harper can inspire you today and how that is a kind of connection to Harper. Other contemporary artists are inspired by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper too.

For example, [musicians came together to adapt her poem](#) “Songs for the People” in honor of the inauguration of President Barack Obama in 2008. Another example is by artist L’Merchie Frazier who created [“Frances Ellen Watkins Harper: Bronze Muse”](#) (2015) using text and images to compose a quilted collage.

**ACT:** Now it is your turn! Create a visual and/or textual collage incorporating Harper’s words along with other writers, poets, and musicians who inspire you. You can create your own lines of prose or poetry too. This project can be constructed in a variety of modes, including [docupoetry](#) (which combines cut and pasted primary sources with author generated prose) or a visual [collage](#).

Share your creations with the public during an art fair, or in a gallery exhibition available to the public at various school and community events like basketball games, school board meetings, or parent-teacher nights.

## Inquiry Description

The Changemakers series of inquiries provide teachers multiple opportunities to incorporate the history of the Underground Railroad into their curriculum across the academic year. Additionally, there are opportunities for cross-disciplinary study and collaboration. While the inquiries are aligned to eighth grade Ohio and Kentucky standards, we hope teachers across grade levels and disciplines utilize these materials. Throughout this series, lessons and activities will connect the Underground Railroad and the abolitionist movement to today through personal and community stories. Spanning various subjects, the overarching theme focuses on the impact changemakers have during their lifetime, the evidence they leave behind, and their ongoing impact today. Lessons and activities are unique and can build upon each other.

The theme is “Changemakers in the Past, Present & Future.” The series begins with an inquiry about historical myths and assumptions emphasizing historical and critical thinking. The second and third inquiries require students to apply these skills while developing questions and completing research regarding two historical narratives: John Parker and Francis Ellen Watkins Harper. The next two series inquiries provide the opportunity to consider, reflect upon, and engage the question of how we are connected to the past. The fourth inquiry has students consider the legacies and evidence we leave for future generations, including the powers that limit and restrict such evidence. The fifth inquiry engages students in changemaking to identify and address a problem of today to create a better tomorrow.

In this inquiry 3 of 5, “Changemakers: Frances Ellen Watkins Harper,” students engage in historical investigation by analyzing literature, specifically poems, short stories, and speeches, as primary texts, providing opportunities for cross disciplinary study with English Language Arts. Harper serves as a case study for the importance of listening to marginalized voices from the past, and the historical significance of literature as primary sources.

Students will be required to conduct independent inquiry within the parameters of the question - What does the life and work of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper teach us about being free, Black, and female in the 1800s?

Students will engage in social justice work by challenging common narratives of U.S. history. In their investigation, students analyze the voice of a Black, female abolitionist and begin to make connections between social justice work of the past and present.

This inquiry embodies the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center principles of courage, cooperation, and perseverance by illustrating how each was necessary for the success of abolition. We encourage teachers and students to visit our museum and continue this exploration through our exhibits and focus on narratives.

## Required Prior Knowledge

Before engaging in this inquiry, students should be able to identify primary and secondary sources. It would also be beneficial for students to have experience sourcing and analyzing primary and secondary sources. If needed, the lesson plan “Teaching Primary and Secondary Sources” provided by The George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, 2011 can be found at:

[georgewbushlibrary.gov/s3fs-public/2021-09/SecondaryLP\\_PrimarySecondarySources\\_Web.pdf](http://georgewbushlibrary.gov/s3fs-public/2021-09/SecondaryLP_PrimarySecondarySources_Web.pdf)

## Staging The Compelling Question

Begin by asking students - Why is there power in poetry, short stories, and speeches? What does literature offer that nonfiction does not? Can literature be a primary source? The following information may be utilized for discussion.

- Poetry and narrative writing, along with different oral traditions, have long been a part of Black cultural production and history. Published works and even works hidden in attic boxes or on dusty library shelves are evidence left by those who lived, struggled, and created in the past. Thus, the written and spoken are evidence of a legacy.
- “For black writers since the eighteenth-century beginnings of the tradition, literature has been one more weapon -- a very important weapon, mind you, but still one weapon among many -- in the arsenal black people have drawn upon to fight against anti-black racism and for their equal rights before the law.” Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Preface to the Penguin Classics edition of France Ellen Watkin Harper’s *Iola Leroy*).
- Toni Morrison was inspired by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s word-work. In particular, Harper’s poem “A Slave Mother (A Tale of the Ohio”) was an inspiration for Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, which captured the emotional and spiritual tumult in the wake of forced family separation during slavery and the life and death circumstances that mothers under slavery faced. In turn, Harper was influenced by African American writers who came before her, including Phillis Wheatley the first Black author to publish a volume in 1773, and Jupiter Hammon, who is the first African American to publish poetry in a magazine.

Ask students - How are Black writers and artists continuing to use literature “to fight against anti-black racism and for their equal rights before the law.” Expand the question to include music, film, dance, and art. Have students brainstorm and generate a list and then give them a few minutes to search the internet for additional examples.

Explain how Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was at the forefront of this movement and that her work has inspired many. By learning about her and her work we can trace the roots of modern racism and sexism to better understand our present.

## Supporting Question 1

The first supporting question - Why is Frances Ellen Watkins Harper significant to history? - has students examine the life of Harper within the context of the gender and racial norms of the 1800s. Throughout the inquiry, students should be reminded to focus on the unique perspective of Harper, who serves as a voice for an often-marginalized group in society.

By examining this question:

- **Students will understand** Harper’s contributions to our understanding of history.
- **Students will understand** the challenges of being free, Black, and female in the 1800s.
- **Students will understand** the importance of listening to marginalized voices of the past.
- **Students will be able to** identify historical information in poetry, short stories, and speeches.

Begin this inquiry by having students investigate the supporting question using the following sources:

- **Text:** Waite, P. (n.d.). Frances Ellen Watkins harper. [coloredconventions.org/ohio-organizing/biographies/frances-ellen-watkins-harper](https://coloredconventions.org/ohio-organizing/biographies/frances-ellen-watkins-harper)
- **Text:** Black Women’s Suffrage. (n.d.). *Frances Ellen Watkins Harper*. Colored Convention Project. [blackwomenssuffrage.dp.la/key-figures/francesEllenWatkinsHarper](https://blackwomenssuffrage.dp.la/key-figures/francesEllenWatkinsHarper)
- **Text:** Zinn Education Project (2022). *April 14, 1875: Frances Harper on Grassroots Organizing During Reconstruction*. [zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/frances-harper-grassroots-organizing-reconstruction](https://zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/frances-harper-grassroots-organizing-reconstruction)
- **Primary Sources:** Black Women’s Suffrage (n.d.). *Search results for Frances Ellen Watkins Harper*. [blackwomenssuffrage.dp.la/search?tags=blackwomenssuffrage+frances+ellen+watkins+harper](https://blackwomenssuffrage.dp.la/search?tags=blackwomenssuffrage+frances+ellen+watkins+harper)

Ask students to share their findings and any questions they have developed. Then, show the PBS video (4:51) “Frances Ellen Watkins Harper”. As students watch, have them corroborate their findings and identify new information that furthers the investigation of the supporting question. Have students share their findings.

You may state:

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was a woman in the free Black community during the 1800s. At that time, her gender and race would have made her a marginalized member of society. Yet, her words continue to inspire people today.

Use the following information to add to student findings as needed:

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911) was an abolitionist, suffragist, antislavery essayist and orator, poet, novelist, and teacher.

- She was born to free Black parents in Baltimore, Maryland (a slave state). She was orphaned at a young age and subsequently raised by her uncle William Watkins who ran a school for African American children.
- Harper lived in Columbus, Ohio and became the first female teacher at Union Seminary as well as helped found the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society.
- She also lived in Philadelphia where she was active in anti-slavery organizing and aided freedom seekers in the Underground Railroad in deed and word.
- After the Civil War, Harper was a prominent voice for the advancement of African Americans, especially for Black women who experienced the dual oppressions of sexism and racism.
- She was a founding member of the National Association of Colored Women. Discuss the above and following biographical information with your students.
- Harper was widowed when her husband, Fenton Harper, passed away soon after their marriage. They had one daughter named Mary.
- Harper’s first collection of poetry, *Forest Leaves* (1845) was lost to the historical record until recently
- Her second collection, *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* was published in 1854.
- “The Two Offers” (1859) was the first short story published by an African American
- After the Civil War, Harper published a long-form poem *Moses: A Story of the Nile* (1869) and three novels serialized in *The Christian Recorder*: *Minnie’s Sacrifice* (1869), *Sowing and Reaping: The Temperance Story* (1876-77), and *Trial and Triumph* (1888-89).

- Her later popular works included *Sketches of Southern Life* (1872) and *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892).
- She was popularly known as the “Bronze Muse” because of her eloquent and powerful writing across several genres (styles of writing).

Ask students to identify additional information needed to truly understand the significance of Harper’s perspective. Prompt students to realize the need to contextualize Harper’s life within the racial and gender roles in the 1800s. Divide students into groups and have them read “Considerations for Women in 19th Century United States” (Appendix A), and “Between Two Worlds: Black Women and the Fight for Voting Rights,” at [nps.gov/articles/black-women-and-the-fight-for-voting-rights.htm](https://nps.gov/articles/black-women-and-the-fight-for-voting-rights.htm). Students may divide the documents into sections and each read and report their assigned section to the group. After reading, have students reconsider the question - Why is Frances Ellen Watkins Harper significant to history? Discussion prompts may include:

- What were the social norms about gender and race during Harper’s lifetime? How did those norms impact Black women’s participation in political and social activities?
- What was significant about Harper’s literary and speaking career?

Finally, have students complete an exit slip answering the supporting question - Why is Frances Ellen Watkins Harper significant to history? Encourage students to summarize their findings instead of listing facts. Have them consider the uniqueness of Harper’s perspective.

## Supporting Question 2

The second supporting question - How does annotating literature improve your understanding? – prepares students to examine the literary works written by Harper. Students will strengthen their annotation skills while considering the historical value of poetry, short stories, and speeches.

By examining this question,

- **Students will understand** the benefits of annotating texts.
- **Students will understand** the historical value of poetry, short stories, and speeches.
- **Students will understand** Harper’s contributions to our understanding of history.
- **Students will understand** the challenges of being free, Black, and female in the 1800s.
- **Students will understand** the importance of listening to marginalized voices of the past.
- **Students will be able to** annotate a text.
- **Students will be able to** identify historical information in poetry, short stories, and speeches.

Begin by sharing the following:

“For black writers since the eighteenth-century beginnings of the tradition, literature has been one more weapon — a very important weapon, mind you, but still one weapon among many — in the arsenal black people have drawn upon to fight against anti-black racism and for their equal rights before the law.”

- Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Preface to the Penguin Classics edition of France Ellen Watkin Harper’s *Iola Leroy*)

We recommend spending time teaching the importance of annotation. This literacy skill engages students in critical literacy and can be applied across disciplines. For this inquiry, annotation will allow students to engage deeply and meaningfully with Harper’s work. We strongly recommend modeling this skill before asking students to perform the task. The following are a few teacher resources for how to teach the skill of annotation.

- The Learning Center. (n.d.). *Annotating Texts*. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <https://learningcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/annotating-texts/>
- Farber, M. (2019, July 22). *Social Annotation in the Digital Age*. Edutopia. <https://www.edutopia.org/article/social-annotation-digital-age>

- Read Write Think. (n.d.). *Teaching Student Annotation: Constructing Meaning Through Connections*. [readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/teaching-student-annotation-constructing](http://readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/teaching-student-annotation-constructing)
- Smekens. (2014, March 11). *Simplify Annotation with Marks, Codes, & Abbreviations*. [smekenseducation.com/marks-codes-abbreviationsannota/](http://smekenseducation.com/marks-codes-abbreviationsannota/)
- Findley, J. (2019, June 12). *Annotating Tips for Close Reading*. Teaching With Jennifer Findley. [jenniferfindley.com/annotating-tips-for-close-reading/](http://jenniferfindley.com/annotating-tips-for-close-reading/)

Have students apply their annotation skills to Harper's sharper's "Songs for the People." A print friendly version, with room for annotations, can be found at [poets.org/poem/songs-people](http://poets.org/poem/songs-people). An audio recording of the poem is also available on the site. After reading an annotation the poem, engage students in a reflection using the following prompts:

- What does the poem communicate? What ideas and feelings are conveyed?
- Do you think the poem means something different today?
- Why do you think Harper wrote the poem?
- What songs do you hear when you think of songs for the people?

The following teacher resource provides an interpretation of the poem:

- Enszer, J. 2018, April 30). *Five Feminist Poems for National Poetry Month: "Songs for the People" by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper*. Ms. Magazine. [msmagazine.com/2018/04/30/five-feminist-poems-for-national-poetry-month-5-songs-for-the-people-by-frances-ellen-watkins-harper](http://msmagazine.com/2018/04/30/five-feminist-poems-for-national-poetry-month-5-songs-for-the-people-by-frances-ellen-watkins-harper)

### Supporting Question 3

The third supporting question - What does the life and work of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper teach us about being free, Black, and female in the 1800s? - has students examine the impacts of literary works written by Harper, a Black female in the 1800s. Throughout the inquiry, students should be reminded to focus on the unique perspective of Harper, who serves as a voice for an often-marginalized group in society.

By examining this question,

- **Students will understand** the benefits of annotating texts.
- **Students will understand** Harper's contributions to our understanding of history.
- **Students will understand** the challenges of being free, Black, and female in the 1800s.
- **Students will understand** the importance of listening to marginalized voices of the past.
- **Students will be able to** annotate a text.
- **Students will be able to** identify historical information in poetry, short stories, and speeches.

Depending upon the needs of your students or classroom, you may choose to have students read and annotate Harper's works as a class, in partners, or individually. We encourage you to allow for student choice. You may direct students towards specific texts dependent upon their expressed interests in Harper, or their reading abilities. The following are suggested texts with teacher resources:

### Speech: We Are All Bound Up Together

- **Primary source:** Watkins Harper, F. E. (1866, May). *We Are All Bound Up Together*. Iowa State..... University Archives of Women's Political Communication (print friendly version). [awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/21/we-are-all-bound-up-together-may-1866](http://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/21/we-are-all-bound-up-together-may-1866)
- **Video Reenactment:** Women & the American Story. (n.d.) Resource: All Bound Up Together. New-York Historical Society Museum and Library (video reenactment, transcript, teacher resources). [wams.nyhistory.org/a-nation-divided/reconstruction/all-bound-up-together](http://wams.nyhistory.org/a-nation-divided/reconstruction/all-bound-up-together)

## ■ Discussion Questions:

- What genre of writing does Harper use in her speech? Why does genre matter and what difference does it make when communicating with different groups of people?
- What does Harper mean that “We are all bound up together?”
- Why was Harper’s experience of being Black and female important to her insights about women’s right to vote?
- Why does Harper state that the right to the ballot will not “cure all the ills of life?” What does that mean and to whom is she directing that comment?
- Who do you think Moses is and why is this person invoked in Harper’s speech?

## Short Story: The Two Offers

- The full text can be found in Appendix B
- Teacher Resource: Oxford Reference. (2022). Overview: The Two Offers. [oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803110402522](https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803110402522)
- **Text and discussion questions:** Voelker, D. J. (2006). *Frances Ellen Watkins Harper “The Two Offers” 1859*. Historytools.org. [introtfictionw13.pbworks.com/w/file/attach/60687727/Harper%20The%20Two%20Offers.pdf](https://introtfictionw13.pbworks.com/w/file/attach/60687727/Harper%20The%20Two%20Offers.pdf)

## Poem: Eliza Harris

- **The poem and an explanation of the connections between Harper and Harriet Beecher Stowe can be found at:** Presley, S. (2017, May 9). *Frances Ellen Watkins Harper: A Short Biography*. Libertarianism. <https://www.libertarianism.org/columns/frances-ellen-watkins-harper>
- **A print friendly version of the poem and links to additional Harper poetry can be found at:** Poetry Foundation (n.d.). *Frances Ellen Watkins Harper*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/frances-ellen-watkins-harper>

At the conclusion of student investigation, compile a class list of findings regarding the supporting question - What does the life and work of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper teach us about being free, Black, and female in the 1800s?

## Summative Performance Task

By engaging in this summative task,

- **Students will be able to** create an argument based on reasoning.

Introduce the summative task:

Today, we can study many different primary and secondary sources to learn about the past. So, why is it important to seek out and learn from those who were marginalized? What do their stories have to offer our understanding of history?

Have students work individually or in pairs to answer these questions. To convey understanding, have students create a 1-minute video conveying their argument and reasoning. These videos could be compiled and archived on a class website and shared with the public.

Have students extend their arguments by answering this additional question: Why should literature, such as short stories and poetry, be valued as historical texts?

## Taking Informed Action

By engaging in the Literacy Legacies Project,





- **Students will be able to** represent how Harper inspires them through a visual and/or textual collage.

**UNDERSTAND:** Think about how there is a connection between the past, present and future. We are connected to people in the past and in the future, others will be connected to us, and through us to others in the past.

**ASSESS:** Consider how Frances Harper can inspire you today and how that is a kind of connection to Harper. Other contemporary artists are inspired by Frances Harper too. For example, musicians came together to adapt her poem “Songs for the People” in honor of the inauguration of President Barack Obama in 2008.

- Gilad, Navon, N., Cohen, A. & The Efroni Choir. (2013, Jan. 21). *Songs for the People*. Bandcamp. [giladsmusic.bandcamp.com/track/songs-for-the-people](http://giladsmusic.bandcamp.com/track/songs-for-the-people)

Another example is by artist L’Merchie Frazier who created “Frances Ellen Watkins Harper: Bronze Muse” (2015) using text and images to compose a quilted collage.

- Frazier, L. (2015). *Bronze Muse*. Minneapolis Institute of Art. [collections.artsmia.org/exhibitions/2854/freedom-rising-i-am-the-story-l-merchie-frazier/art/138162](http://collections.artsmia.org/exhibitions/2854/freedom-rising-i-am-the-story-l-merchie-frazier/art/138162)

**ACT:** Now it is your turn! Create a visual and/or textual collage incorporating Harper’s words along with other writers, poets, and musicians who inspire you. You can create your own lines of prose or poetry too. This project can be constructed in a variety of modes, including docupoetry (which combines cut and pasted primary sources with author generated prose) or a visual collage.

- Poetry River. (n.d.). *Documentary poetry*. [poetryriver.org/docupoetry.html](http://poetryriver.org/docupoetry.html)

Share your creations with the public during an art fair, or in a gallery exhibition available to the public at various school and community events like basketball games, school board meetings, or parent-teacher nights.

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