

Resource Sheet #10

Poetry of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

She's Free

"On September 24, 1862, this Emancipation Proclamation, signed by the president two days earlier, was transferred to the War Department adjutant general's office as Executive Order No. 139. But its meaning has been recorded in these lines by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper from the poem 'She's Free' "¹:

She's Free

*The bloodhounds have miss'd the scent of her way,
The hunter is rifled and foiled of his prey,
The cursing of men and clanking of chains
Make sounds of strange discord on Liberty's plains...
Oh! Poverty, danger and death she can brave,
For the child of her love is no longer a slave.
Wednesday, September 24, 1862
Confederate States USA*

Peace

first published in *Christian Recorder*, June 26, 1873²

Welcome Peace! Thou blest evangel-
Welcome to this war-cursed land;
O'er the weary waiting millions
Let thy banner unfurled.
On the burning brow of anger
Lay thy gentle, soothing hand;
Say to Carnage and Destruction,
Ye shall cease to blight the land.

Plead in tones of love and mercy,
'Mid the battle's crash and roar;
'Till the nations new created
Learn the art of war no more.
On the brow of martial Glory
Bid the people place their ban;

¹ Janus Adams, *Sister Days: 365 Inspired Moments in African American Women's History* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2000), 9-24.

² Frances Smith Foster, ed., *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader* (New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1990), 212.

Nothing in the world is sacred
Like the sacredness of man.
Heroes grasping fame and laurels
On the bloody fields of crime;
'Tis a fearful path to glory,
Over human hearts to climb.
God for man did light each planet,
Warmed the sun, and bade it shine;
And upon each human spirit
Left his finger prints divine.

Bury deep your proud ambitions.
Cease your struggles, fierce and wild;
Oh, 'tis higher bliss to rescue,
Than to trample down God's child.
Better far to aid the feeble,
Raise the groveller from the clod;
Lives are only great and noble
When they clasp both man and God

Learning to Read³

Written in 1854 by Miss Watkins (to become some 7 years later Mrs. Harper) when she was 29 years old. She had been published many times and was well on her way to becoming a famous author.

Very soon the Yankee teachers
Come down and set up school;
But, Oh! How the Rebs did hate it,--
It was again' their rule.

Our masters always tried to hide
Book learning from our eyes;
Knowledge didn't agree with slavery--
'twould make us all too wise.

But some of us would try to steal
A little from the book,
And put the words together,
And learn by hook or crook.

I remember Uncle Caldwell,
Who put the words together,
And learn by hook or crook.
And hid it in his hat.

³ This poem is available at <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/samples/random045/99039428.html>.

And had his master ever seen
The leaves upon his head,
He'd have thought them greasy papers,
But nothing to be read.

And there was Mr. Turner's Ben,
Who heard the children spell,
And pick the words right up by heart,
And learned to read 'em well.

Well, the Northern folks kept sending
The Yankee teachers down;
And they stood night up and helped us,
Though Rebs did sneer and frown.

And, I longed to read my Bible,
For precious words it said;
But when I begun to learn it,
Folks just shook their heads,

And said there is no use trying,
Oh! Chloe, you're to late;
But as I was rising sixty,
I had no time to wait.

So I got a pair of glasses,
And straight to work I went,
And never stopped till I could read
The hymns and Testament.

Then I got a little cabin--
A place to call my own--
And I felt as independent
As the queen upon her throne.