

## The Unitarian Poet



### Frances (Watkins) Harper of Baltimore, MD (1825-1911)

Frances Harper was an African-American poet, writer, and political activist who worked hard to abolish slavery and promote full suffrage for all regardless of race or gender. Her most famous work, *Iola Leroy*, published in 1892, really illustrates her Unitarian theology in her representation of African-Americans who, by overcoming their suffering, have the ability to transform society in dramatic and progressive ways.

Although *Iola Leroy*, her final work, was a novel, Frances was most prolific as a poet, publishing a number of volumes of poetry that attacked both racism and the oppression of women. Most of the money she earned from her writing (and a later lecturing career) went to abolitionist causes. In the years before the Civil War, she was much in demand on the anti-slavery circuit and she traveled extensively giving talks throughout Pennsylvania, Ohio and elsewhere.

Frances was born in Maryland to free parents whose names, sadly, are unknown. Following her mother's death when she was just 3 years old, Frances was raised by her aunt and uncle, the famous abolitionist William Watkins. The family attended the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church, an institution Watkins would hold dear in her heart throughout her life, although she would later

become a committed Unitarian. At the age of 14, Frances held a job as a domestic worker in a Quaker household and there was encouraged to use the family library and work on her literary aspirations.

Following passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, the Watkins family moved away from the slave state of Maryland to the relative safety of free Pennsylvania where, now on her own, she helped escaped slaves as they passed through Philadelphia on the Underground Railroad on route to Canada.

In 1859, her tale “The Two Offers” appeared in the *Anglo-African* and became the first short story published by an African-American. A year later, Frances married widower Fenton Harper and become step-mother to his three children, moving with him to Ohio. She and Fenton had a daughter, Mary, in 1862 and Fenton died in 1864.

Following the Civil War, Frances moved with Mary to Philadelphia where she and Mary joined the First Unitarian Church. At the Unitarian church, she found a rare opportunity to work with both black and white communities and forge connections that were important to her political activism.

With slavery ended, she turned her considerable energy and writing skills to women’s rights. She worked right along with women like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton to secure votes for women. Then and throughout her life, she continued to write, publishing a number of books of poetry and novels, including *Sketches of Southern Life* (1872) and *Trial and Triumph* (1889).

Harper died on February 22, 1911 and her funeral was held at the Unitarian Church on Chestnut Street in Philadelphia. She was buried next to Mary who had passed away two years earlier. In 1992 African-American Unitarian Universalists honored Frances Harper and commemorated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Iola Leroy* by installing a new headstone in place of the old one, fallen and neglected.

Harper’s legacy spans gender and race and her call for a full development of human potential lives on in Unitarian Universalism and elsewhere.