

# Before Rosa Parks: Frances Watkins Harper

## GOALS (LANGUAGE ARTS AND U.S. HISTORY TOPICS)

- Students will analyze the rhetorical strategies Frances Watkins Harper used, such as tone, emotional appeal and descriptive language
- Students will consider the post-Civil War culture in U.S. history, particularly as it affected blacks and women
- Students will explore the racial dynamics of the woman suffrage movement

## RATIONALE

Many people consider the 1950s the “beginning” of the Civil Rights Movement, creating a void between the abolition of slavery and *Brown v. Board of Education*. Similarly, voids exist in women’s history between the Seneca Falls Convention and the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment. The intersection of black and female involvement in both suffrage and civil rights activism offers a view of history that deserves exploration.

Both the life story of Frances Watkins Harper and an excerpt from one of her speeches help to fill the void. Coincidentally, Harper also spent significant time in Alabama and struggled with segregation on public transportation, which makes a brief glance at her life and work an interesting precursor to thinking about Rosa Parks’ experience with Alabama public transportation almost 100 years later.

## PROCESS

### PART I

- Explain to students that they are going to analyze part of a speech by Frances Harper, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century black woman activist who, like Rosa Parks, struggled against segregation.
- Distribute the handout, asking for a volunteer to read the brief biographical description of Harper.
- Ask students what they know about the woman suffrage movement, the abolition movement and Reconstruction. Write the background information on the board. Students might mention the Seneca Falls Convention, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton or Frederick Douglass.
- Give brief background about suffrage and abolition, if necessary.

### PART II

- Ask students to read the excerpt from the speech independently, then read the entire excerpt aloud.
- As you go through the discussion questions, read the section of the speech pertaining to the question aloud again.

*This activity meets curriculum standards in Language Arts and U.S. History as outlined by Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition ([www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks](http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks)).*

# Before Rosa Parks: Frances Watkins Harper Discussion Handout Part I

Born free in Baltimore in 1824, Frances Watkins taught at Wilberforce University, lectured for the Maine Anti-Slavery society before the Civil War and collaborated extensively with white suffragists and abolitionists. She married Fenton Harper in 1860 and, until her husband died in 1864, attempted to run a small farm in Ohio. His death left her with a young daughter and very few financial resources. She began a new lecture tour in the South, addressing audiences of freed slaves, and continued to speak at woman suffrage conventions, where her audience was primarily white. Already the best-known and loved African American poet of her time, Harper also began writing novels in 1869.

Harper's first novel, *Minnie's Sacrifice*, tells the story of a young woman from a wealthy family who leaves home to teach the children of former slaves. The heroine, Minnie, gets lynched by the Ku Klux Klan, sacrificing her life for her people. While Harper wrote this novel, she was teaching in the South and often threatened by former slave traders, "rebels" and the Klan. Although Harper, like Minnie, was in grave danger, she wrote letters to Northern friends repeatedly reassuring them that she was not afraid.

Like Rosa Parks who followed her, Harper rarely seemed afraid. In an April 23, 1858, letter she wrote to the *Liberator*, an anti-slavery newspaper, Harper described her reaction to segregation on public transportation:

I have been insulted on several railroad cars. The other day, in attempting to ride in one of the city cars, after I had entered, the conductor came to me, and wanted me to go out on the platform. Now, was not that brave and noble? As a matter of course, I did not. Some one interfered, and asked or requested that I might be permitted to sit in a corner. I did not move, but kept the same seat. When I was about to leave, he refused my money, and I threw it down on the car floor, and got out, after I had ridden as far as I wished. Such impudence!

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why would it be unusual for Harper to talk to abolitionists about prejudice in the North?
2. What do you think Harper's tone is when she says "was not that brave and noble"? Why would her readers expect the conductor to be brave and noble? Why are Harper's expectations about conductors' behavior different from white readers?
3. Why do you think Harper refused to go out on the platform, as a "matter of course"?
4. Do you think the person who asked if she could sit in the corner was trying to help? Why or why not?
5. Why do you think the conductor refused her money?
6. What is Harper's tone as she describes throwing her money down "after I had ridden as far as I wished"?
7. Who does she think is being impudent?

# Before Rosa Parks: Frances Watkins Harper Discussion Handout Part II

Excerpt from “We Are All Bound up Together: Proceedings of the Eleventh Women’s Rights Convention,” May 1866, pages 45-48:

Frances Watkins Harper — You white women speak here of rights. I speak of wrongs. I, as a colored woman, have had in this country an education which has made me feel as if I were in the situation of Ishmael, my hand against every man, and every man’s hand against me. Let me go to-morrow morning and take my seat in one of your street cars — I do not know that they will do it in New York, but they will in Philadelphia — and the conductor will put up his hand and stop the car rather than let me ride.

A Lady [from the audience] — They will not do that here.

Mrs. Harper — They do in Philadelphia. Going from Washington to Baltimore this Spring, they put me in the smoking car.

Loud Voices [from the audience] — Shame.

Mrs. Harper — Aye, in the capital of the nation, where the black man consecrated himself to the nation’s defense, faithful when the white man was faithless, they put me in the smoking car! They did it once; but the next time they tried it, they failed; for I would not go in. I felt the fight in me; but I don’t want to have to fight all the time. To-day I am puzzled where to make my home. I would like to make it in Philadelphia, near my own friends and relations, but if I want to ride in the streets of Philadelphia, they send me to ride on the platform with the driver.

Cries [from the audience] — Shame.

Mrs. Harper — Have women nothing to do with this? Not long since, a colored woman took her seat in an Eleventh Street car in Philadelphia, and the conductor stopped the car, and told the rest of the passengers to get out, and left the car with her in it alone, when they took it back to the station. One day I took my seat in a car, and the conductor came to me and told me to take another seat. I just screamed “murder.” The man said if I was black I ought to behave myself. I knew that if he was white he was not behaving himself. Are there not wrongs to be righted?

# Before Rosa Parks: Frances Watkins Harper Discussion Questions Part II (Student Handout)

1. When Harper says “You white women speak here of rights. I speak of wrongs,” she asks them to consider how the situation for black women without the vote might differ from that of white women. What rights, in addition to the vote, do you think white women wanted?
2. In the 1860s, “ladies” did not smoke. Men who sat in the smoking car of trains not only used tobacco but also drank alcohol, gambled and (because they were not in the “polite” company of “ladies”) used lewd language. While the men chose to segregate themselves in these cars and white women enjoyed separate “ladies cars,” Harper had to fight for her choice of car. What assumptions about Harper went into the conductor’s decision to make her sit with the rowdy men?
3. According to Harper, black women had to endure social “wrongs” as well as demand “rights.” What does her street car story tell us about the way white men and women saw black women?
4. Following the comment that, “I don’t want to have to fight all the time,” Harper says she would like to make her home among her friends and family. She implies that the “wrongs” she faces in Philadelphia and further south prevent her from living happily among her relatives and friends. Even if the white women in the audience cannot relate to Harper’s complaints about public transportation, how do you think she expects them to react to the idea of home, friends and family that she wishes she could enjoy? To what common feelings and experiences among her audience members, regardless of race, class or gender, does Harper appeal?
5. After Harper talks about her longing to live happily in Philadelphia, she goes into greater detail about her resistance to the street car conductors. She talks about another rider being left alone on the street car. What emotional argument does she make about the impact of street car segregation? What feelings, in addition to loneliness, do you think she invokes in her readers?
6. Why does her audience cry out, “Shame,” while she speaks? Who do you think the audience perceives as feeling shame in the story, and whom do you think the audience believes should be ashamed?
7. What do you think Harper wants her audience — predominantly white upper middle class women and men — to do about segregation? Why does she think segregation is a women’s issue?

# Before Rosa Parks: Frances Watkins Harper Discussion Questions Part II (Teacher's Guide)

1. When Harper says “You white women speak here of rights. I speak of wrongs,” she asks them to consider how the situation for black women without the vote might differ from that of white women. What rights, in addition to the vote, do you think white women wanted? *(some answers might include the right to own property, to get a divorce, to have custody of their children or to attend universities)*
2. In the 1860s, “ladies” did not smoke. Men who sat in the smoking car of trains not only used tobacco but also drank alcohol, gambled and (because they were not in the “polite” company of “ladies”) used lewd language. While the men chose to segregate themselves in these cars and white women enjoyed separate “ladies cars,” Harper had to fight for her choice of car. What assumptions about Harper went into the conductor’s decision to make her sit with the rowdy men? *(some answers might include that she was not a “lady,” that she was not sophisticated or polite enough to take offense to rowdy behavior, that she did not deserve respect from men because, as a black, she was less than a woman)*
3. According to Harper, black women had to endure social “wrongs” as well as demand “rights.” What does her street car story tell us about the way white men and women saw black women? *(that they shouldn’t sit among white “ladies,” that their presence is a threat to whites, that they are more capable of standing up and enduring physical hardship than whites)*
4. Following the comment that, “I don’t want to have to fight all the time,” Harper says she would like to make her home among her friends and family. She implies that the “wrongs” she faces in Philadelphia and further south prevent her from living happily among her relatives and friends. Even if the white women in the audience cannot relate to Harper’s complaints about public transportation, how do you think she expects them to react to the idea of home, friends and family that she wishes she could enjoy? To what common feelings and experiences among her audience members, regardless of race, class or gender, does Harper appeal? *(a sense of home, belonging, security, support from loved ones, contentment)*
5. After Harper talks about her longing to live happily in Philadelphia, she goes into greater detail about her resistance to the street car conductors. She talks about another rider being left alone on the street car. What emotional argument does she make about the impact of street car segregation? What feelings, in addition to loneliness, do you think she invokes in her readers? *(alienation, humiliation, frustration, indignation)*
6. Why does her audience cry out, “Shame,” while she speaks? Who do you think the audience perceives as feeling shame in the story, and whom do you think the audience believes should be ashamed? *(the conductor and other passengers might be ashamed of their petty exclusionary behavior, the “colored woman” could feel shame because her skin color is being targeted, citizens who can vote in a country with these kinds of laws might feel shame)*
7. What do you think Harper wants her audience — predominantly white upper middle class women and men — to do about segregation? Why does she think segregation is a women’s issue? *(she wants white women to let black women sit next to them, she wants white men to vote and make laws preventing segregation, you cannot separate black issues from women’s issues because half of the African American population is female and a percentage of the female population is African American)*