Name: _____ Class: _____

Learning to Read

By Frances Ellen Watkins Harper
1872

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911) was an abolitionist, suffragist, public speaker, teacher, and writer. She grew up as the child of free African American parents. Harper wrote for anti-slavery newspapers and helped enslaved African Americans escape through the Underground Railroad, which was a network of routes and safe houses leading to free states and Canada. As you read, take notes on the challenges the speaker faced in learning to read.

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[1] Very soon the Yankee[1] teachers
Came down and set up school;
But, oh! how the Rebs[2] did hate it, —
It was agin' their rule.

[5] 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
[10] A little from the book,
And put the words together,
And learn by hook or crook.

I remember Uncle Caldwell,
Who took pot-liquor fat
[15] And greased the pages of his book,
And hid it in his hat.

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

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

[25] Well, the Northern folks kept sending

1. "Yankees" refers to those from the Northern states. During the American Civil War, these states made up the Union and fought against the Confederacy.
2. "Rebs" is short for "rebels." It refers to those who sided with the Confederacy during the American Civil War, namely to maintain Southern institutions, such as slavery.

The Yankee teachers down;
And they stood right up and helped us,
Though Rebs did sneer and frown.

And, I longed to read my Bible,
[30] 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 too late;
[35] 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
[40] The hymns and Testament.[3]

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

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3. The Christian Bible is divided into two sections: the Old and New Testament.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which of the following best summarizes the action of this poem?
    A. The speaker describes the risks that she and other former slaves took to educate themselves and learning how to read as an adult.
    B. The speaker describes how she managed to escape enslavement so that she could be free and attend school in the North.
    C. The speaker describes her childhood growing up on a plantation in the South as a daughter of a slaveholder.
    D. The speaker describes the brutality she experienced as a former slave by the slaveholder named Mr. Turner.

2. PART A: Which of the following best describes the author's most likely purpose for writing this poem?
    A. to warn enslaved people about dangerous escape routes
    B. to teach enslaved people how to avoid getting caught with papers and books
    C. to incite a rebellion against Mr. Turner and other slaveholders
    D. to spread awareness about the injustices of slavery and the benefits of education

3. PART B: Choose a quote from the passage that best supports your answer to Part A.
    A. "Knowledge didn't agree with slavery — / 'Twould make us all too wise." (Lines 7-8)
    B. "And put the words together, / And learn by hook or crook." (Lines 11-12)
    C. "He'd have thought them greasy papers, / But nothing to be read." (Lines 19-20)
    D. "Then I got a little cabin — / A place to call my own — " (Lines 41-42)

4. In line 9, what is the effect of the word "steal" on the overall message of the poem? Why did the poet choose to use this word? Explain your answer.

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5. Who is "Mr. Turner's Ben" and how did he learn how to read? Support your answer with evidence from the text.

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6. PART A: Which of the following best describes the speaker's feeling about eventually learning how to read?
   A. The speaker is scared that the Rebs will find out about it.
   B. The speaker is unsure about how education will affect her future.
   C. The speaker feels powerful because she can access knowledge on her own.
   D. The speaker feels resentful toward the Yankee teachers who set up the schools.

7. PART B: Which of the following quotes from the poem best supports your answer to Part A?
   A. "Our masters always tried to hide / Book learning from our eyes" (Lines 5-6)
   B. "They stood right up and helped us / Though the Rebs did sneer and frown." (Lines 27-28)
   C. "But when I began to learn it, / Folks just shook their heads" (Lines 31-32)
   D. "As the queen upon her throne." (Line 44)

8. Which of the following best describes the poem's rhyme scheme?
   A. The poem has no rhyme scheme.
   B. The first and second lines in each stanza rhyme.
   C. The second and fourth lines in each stanza rhyme.
   D. The poem changes its rhyme scheme halfway through at line 21.

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Why didn't the masters want to slaves to have knowledge? Explain your answer. Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.

2. What is the relationship between literacy (knowing how to read) and power?

3. What does this text teach us about prejudice and discrimination, education, and social mobility? Explain your answer.