



## Iola Leroy: Shadows Uplifted

*Frances Ellen Watkins Harper*

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## **Iola Leroy: Shadows Uplifted** Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

Being very desirous that one of the race so long distinguished in the cause of freedom for her intellectual worth as Mrs. Harper has had the honor of being should not at this late date in life make a blunder which might detract from her own good name I naturally proposed to await developments before deciding too quickly in favor of giving encouragement to her contemplated effort.

## **Iola Leroy: Shadows Uplifted Details**

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Author : Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

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## From Reader Review Iola Leroy: Shadows Uplifted for online ebook

### Becky says

I had to read this novel, not just because I have to for uni :( but also because it is considered to be one of the very first novels written by a black woman. Being such an important text, it just had to be delved into. However, I found that because approximately half of the book is written in dialect that was attributed to how uneducated black slaves did speak, that the novel was a grueling read. Yet, I did like the themes of the book, and knowing that it was written by a black woman, made me view it as a more truthful representation of what life was really like for enslaved black men and woman, and most importantly, people who were the product of miscegenation, and therefore victims of the 'one drop rule'.

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### Will says

[21]

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### K.A. Masters says

A progressive evaluation of the role of people of color in post-Civil War society. Although it ends with a saccharine "happily ever after" that was rarely attainable for the time period, the author doesn't pull her punches exposing the social ills of 1890s America. She shrewdly analyzes the various movements that worked in tandem with slavery to oppress people of color, most notably, a scathing look of the double-edged sword of Christianity and organized religion. The dialog is atrocious ("Law' hab eber de mersee", etc.) but fairly commonplace for the time period when the book was written. Overall, a worthwhile read.

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### Frank García says

Postulating a theory on the social construction of race in the late 1800s. Touché

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### Lora says

A Mississippi plantation owner frees, educates & marries a former slave whom he passes as white. The story follows his middle child, Iola Leroy, from her privileged childhood to the devastation brought on their family by the American Civil War.

Written in the late 19th century, the book's style is a product of its time - plot plays second fiddle to social commentary, tropes stand in for characters. So rather than a suspension of disbelief, what the reader experiences is the pure & passionate voice of Frances E. W. Harper herself. It's the voice of an amazing mind that expertly dissects how a hegemony can exploit, debase, & fear its helpless minority.

If writing today, Mrs Harper would probably be panned as a Caucasian's apologist. Writing in the 1890s & a WOC herself, she was fearless. If ever I'm given that dinner attended by my favourite authors, living or dead,

I would hope to be seated next to Frances E. W. Harper.

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## Laura says

I have a lot of problems with this book. Even though it was composed by a female author, several aspects of it are still sexist. Additionally, it equates the of slavery with the evil of intemperance. And then, it essentially doubles as a religious text. Slavery itself is hardly touched on—which, perhaps, is due to the fact that it is a postbellum novel, and so the exposé was a less important aspect—and much of the story is spent on essay-like discourse between characters who are trying to figure out how freedmen ought to comport themselves. Which was boring, and meant that the characters didn't feel at all like real people. Essentially, this book was an instruction manual for moral Christian life, disguised as a novel.

Everyone exists to fulfill their heteronormative role and promote sobriety. (view spoiler)

One character (who, it is implied, we ought to agree with) says, "I do not think...that we can begin too early to teach our boys to be amnyl and self-respecting, and our girls to be useful and self-reliant" (Harper 193). I aggressively gagged when I read that. Another actual quotation from the novel: "the true strength of a race means purity in women and uprightness in men" (Harper 193).

Additionally, the book, despite its anti-racist messages manages to be subtly racist itself—the characters with traditionally white educations repeatedly serve as moral guides for their illiterate elders, as if their more "privileged" upbringing makes them more moral human beings. Of the books we've read in ENG 265, this is by far the most frustrating. Unless you're a new age temperance activist, I'd say there are books that treat the more relevant themes far better.

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## Orion says

Frances Watkins Harper was born free in 1825 in Baltimore and was 67 years old when Iola Leroy was published. Before the Civil War she was a public speaker and political activist in the Abolitionist Movement and helped escaping slaves along the Underground Railroad. After the war she travelled the South speaking out for temperance, and the rights of women and African Americans, and other social causes.

Iola Leroy or, *Shadows Uplifted* is one of the first novels published by an African-American woman. It tells the story of a wealthy Mississippi planter who frees and marries his mixed-race slave. They have two children, Iola and Harry, that are raised without knowledge of their mixed background and educated in the North. In spite of his sincerest efforts to secure their future, after his death greedy relatives thrust Iola and her mother into slavery.

The book deals with Iola's emancipation and the period after the war when she tries to find her mother and brother and reestablish their lives together. As Iola and her brother are light skinned and highly educated, the book also deals with issues of passing and miscegenation. The concept of a single-drop of African blood making a person non-White and subject to ill-treatment by Society is a major theme. Written less than a decade before the Wilmington Massacre of 1898, this was a time when African-American prospects were still promising but were being threatened by racism and separatist thinking.

This novel is a great window on the era prior to the extreme racial repressions of the 20th Century, when Black people had hoped that education, hard work, and social responsibility could bring them social justice in the nation. As such, it is a great source of information written by a leader in the social justice movement of

the time.

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### **Tony says**

I'm halfway through, and I'm not sure one could, if one really tried, write more dreadfully. To get close, one would have to mimic the styles of Danielle Steele and Robert Ludlum, overlay it with the worst sentimentality of the past three hundred years, and then weld it all together with grim death marches of exposition that make Cliff's Notes read like great literature.

Even then it would be a close contest. I would rather read the most stultifying of State Department briefings than the second half of this novel. *Iola Leroy* is proof that nobility and good intentions on the part of the author do not make for good reading, and may very well impede it. I understand that in skillful hands it can be used to make all sorts of points, to a captive student audience, about racism, sexism, classism, and other nefarious *isms*, but then so can any number of Bugs Bunny cartoons, and without the consequent trauma to the reader.

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### **Andrew says**

Pretty awkward with its narrative elements; much more a novel of ideas. I recommend it since it testifies to the marriage of nineteenth century morality with progressive ideals of racial justice. "Caste plays such fantastic tricks on this country," says one character - and the novel does a good job of highlighting this. Even more intriguing is the novel's moral certitude alongside a sneaky skepticism of some of its heroes. It critiques white liberals and has a feminist undercurrent.

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### **Cara Byrne says**

"No, no," said Leroy, tenderly, "it is not that I regret our marriage, or feel the least disdain for our children on account of the blood in their veins; but I do not wish them to grow up under the contracting influence of this race prejudice. I do not wish them to feel that they have been born under a proscription from which no valor can redeem them, nor that any social advancement or individual development can wipe off the ban which clings to them. No, Marie, let them go North, learn all they can, aspire all they may. The painful knowledge will come all too soon. Do not forestall it. I want them simply to grow up as other children; not being patronized by friends nor disdained by foes." (83).

While I celebrate this book for being one of the earliest novels written by an African American (and for surviving and being resurrected by scholars of AA lit), I'm not sure I would recommend as a wonderful work of art or assign it in my class. I agree with Du Bois when he wrote a eulogy in *The Crisis* in 1911 for Harper stating that "she was not a great writer, but she wrote much worth reading. She was, above all, sincere." It's a foundational work and important when considering the history of the nineteenth century American novel - especially written by black women who faced many odds when attempting to write and publish.

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## Stephanie says

Very clearly written as a moralistic tale, but the racial issues described are depressingly still relevant today.

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## Dayle says

Mrs Harper's only novel was intended to encourage good citizenship and education for those who had long been under the yoke of slavery. It would be a good lesson for all peoples in taking the initiative to better themselves and be productive and successful members of society.

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## DCurtiss00 says

### A Romantic ending to a debilitating national institution

After imbibing a dearth of slave narratives, autobiographies and sentimental African American novels, I'm glad to end a semester of antebellum literary study with Francis Harper's Iola Leroy. It's difficult to imagine the courage of those who sought progress and resolve after the civil war and chattel slavery. Iola embodies the necessary spirit of the African race to see this nation as her own, and despite pervading racial hatred at the turn of the century (even still today), her courage lights the path for others rising out of the shadow of a dark history. Iola is a heroine, a philanthropist, a nurse to the sick and weak of heart. If only Harper's novel had set the tone for humanitarian resolve going into the 20th century...

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## Emily says

Tough slog to get through, but it still managed to hold my interest. It's the story of a young woman (the eponymous Iola) who is raised as a proper young Southern girl, the daughter of a plantation owner... but discovers at the time of her father's death that her mother is actually a former slave who has been passing as white with the help of the father. Iola and her brother are outed as being black, and are shocked and dismayed at the unexpected change in their circumstances. Eventually they find their extended black family and reunite with them.

The thing that surprised me the most is that so many slaves or former slaves looked white enough to pass... that's not something that is discussed in much detail in modern classrooms when discussing Black history.

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## Angie says

Major Fields Prep: 11/133

Although written near the end of the century, Harper's first novel details the events of the Civil War and particularly focuses on the era of Reconstruction. Her protagonist, Iola, adheres to many values of the Cult of True Womanhood, including piety and temperance. The text remains largely concerned with the betterment of the black family, the security of black mothers, and the education of formerly enslaved people. Harper endorses notions of "racial uplift" and epitomizes the themes of Reconstruction literature regarding a hopeful

future, slavery as a curse upon America that could only be remedied through violent war, and that black Americans were the victims of an unjust world and therefore their emancipation shows their favored status in God's eye.

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### **Alexandria says**

The book is a decent novel. However, I was left with wanting something more. I felt as if the climax occurred early on and then the rest of the novel was a drawn out resolution. The book focused more on life after slavery rather than during, which is a change for this time period.

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### **Den Slader says**

Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* features an uncommon heroine; Iola Leroy appears white, but chooses to embrace her African American ancestry amidst the turbulent racial controversies that plagued America throughout the Antebellum Period, the Civil War, and the Reconstruction Period. By rejecting the opportunity to identify herself as white through an unsuitable marriage, Iola discards the idea that a biracial woman should feel shame when she embraces her ancestry. As such, Harper's novel challenges the "tragic mulatto" categorization, which first appeared as an American literary genre in the mid-nineteenth century. First published in 1892, Harper was conscious of the typical "tragic mulatta" plots (stories in which the protagonist is a biracial woman) that usually featured a character who suddenly discovered she was of mixed ethnic ancestry – particularly, the result of a union between a black African American and a white European American. The most typical "tragic mulattas" were very light-skinned and devastated to discover their "impurity." Fearing rejection and humiliation, they struggled to conceal their genealogy from others, especially potential husbands. Inevitably, these women found themselves exposed and tragically ostracized from their society. Although she begins *Iola Leroy* in similar vein, Harper pushes past the oppressiveness of the genre, and rapidly develops her novel into a story of self-reliance, family unity, and the quest to elevate both the self and others from the inhumanity of slavery.

One of the techniques Harper uses to convey Iola's progression of self-awareness is through dividing the novel into three major marital subplots. First, Harper introduces a marriage between Iola's parents prior to the Civil War. Because Iola's mother is a light-skinned former slave who falls in love with a Southern plantation owner, Harper uses this marriage to familiarize the reader with the prejudices that will inevitably change Iola's life forever. Next, Harper introduces a white doctor who wishes to marry Iola while she is serving as a nurse during the Civil War. Iola rejects this marriage proposal, as she cannot fathom a marriage between a biracial woman like herself and a man who does not share her ancestry. Finally, during the Reconstruction, Iola meets another young doctor who shares a similar mixed ethnic heritage, and the two of them find themselves in a unique position to encourage and uplift former slaves by teaching self-reliance and the value of education. While each marriage/proposal represents a critical period of personal development in Iola, Harper uses the stories to discuss a number of the challenges to overcoming slavery: coping with the human degradation forced upon slaves prior to the Civil War, the need to compose and identify rapidly changing self-images during the War, and the struggle to elevate former slaves amid massive prejudices present during the Reconstruction.

Harper ends her novel shortly after Latimer and Iola are wed, remarking that the couple returned to the South. Iola idealistically remarks on her future: "I am going to teach in the Sunday-school, help in the church, hold mothers' meetings to help these boys and girls to grow up to be good men and women" (276). As such, the reader is expected to acknowledge that in order to be "good," men and women will need both

self-reliance and community support. Though struggles and conflict permeate most of the novel, it seems the finale overflows with unbelievable idealism. Hortense Spillers writes: "Iola Leroy, in the closure of the novel, is not only a character, but also Character Extraordinaire...[an] eponymous heroine, the piously sacred overtakes her" (316). Offered as a cure to all ailments, the marriage of Latimer and Iola is intended to prepare the reader for Harper's optimistic final lines: "The shadows have been lifted from all their lives; and peace, like bright dew, has descended upon their paths. Blessed themselves, their lives are a blessing to others" (281). The reader is left with the remnants of a fairytale, where the "world has ended as the character slips away from earth into the non-historical eternity of the unchanging" (Spillers 316). I believe, however, that the idealism Harper expresses in the conclusion is not only about Iola, but Harper's optimism about the potential future of black Americans as they moved into the twentieth century. Because Iola Leroy was written to combat the "tragic mulatto" storyline (and especially the dominant cultural views about black and biracial women), no other ending was appropriate. Harper needed to embrace a conclusion that represented a radical departure from the "tragic mulatto" genre. Harper's ending had to be exactly what people were unaccustomed to hearing – that blacks did not desire to be white, that mulattos were not tragic, and that social change in the black community could be undertaken quite well by the black community itself.

**WORK CITED:**

Spillers, Hortense J. *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003.

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**Toni Stewart says**

**Inspirational Read**

This book painted a fantasized love story intertwined in a heinous time in history with accuracy and sensitivity. It motivated me to be better and take advantage of each opportunity. The characters were well thought out. Exceptional read.

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**Kristen says**

So overly saccharine it made my teeth hurt. And who would have thought a novel written by a temperance supporter especially for women's church groups would be so damn preachy?

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**Lauren says**

Another "how have I not read this yet?" book for me, -Iola Leroy- is the only novel written by Harper, a prolific writer of poetry and nonfiction and an important social activist and lecturer in 19th- century America. The book was written in 1892 but takes place during and immediately after the Civil War, mainly in the late 1860s and early 1870s.

In many ways, this book feels hyper-relevant to today's social and racial inequalities; passages like the following could have been written yesterday: "To be born white in this country is to be born to an inheritance of privileges, to hold in your hands the keys that open before you the doors of every occupation, advantage, opportunity, and achievement" (pp. 265-66 in my edition, Beacon Press, 1987, ed. Hazel Carby). Other

passages asserting both black and white women's limited choices/expectations, the particular prejudices facing mixed race people, and liberal white complicity in black oppression are similarly prescient and applicable to American life today.

In other ways, it's fully a 19th-c American novel, so it will appeal to a limited audience of people who delight in flowery language, narrative asides about temperance, and philosophical tangents. Hazel Carby's informative introduction helps situate the text in literary history without "spoiling it," so you can read that first for context. I loved that this text prefigured so many of the competing arguments of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois while also asserting new points specific to black womanhood and intersectionality. I would include Harper in any African American literature course that takes up these turn-of-the-20th-century debates about social justice, racism and racial violence, and our previous and current attempts (or lack of attempts) at national reconciliation of these issues.

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