

Name: _____ Class: _____

Learning to Read

By Francis Ellen Watkins Harper
1872

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911) was the child of free African-American parents. She attended the Academy for Negro Youth until she was 13 years old. In her adult life, Harper helped slaves escape through the Underground Railroad (a network of routes and safe houses used by slaves in the 19th century) and wrote for anti-slavery newspapers. As you read, take notes on the obstacles the students face while learning to read.

[1] Very soon the Yankee¹ teachers
Came down and set up school;
But, oh! how the Rebs² 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.



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1. "Yankees" are people from the northern Union states. During the Civil War, Union states fought against Confederate states.
 2. "Rebs" is short for "rebels." The term refers to Confederate sympathizers, who, during the Civil War, fought to maintain Southern society (including slavery).

[25] Well, the Northern folks kept sending
 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 New and Old 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. A slave girl reflects on her childhood when she was denied the right to an education. She describes the great risks that she and other slaves took in order to learn.
 - B. A speaker, who was once a slave, describes how she managed to escape so that she could attend school in the North.
 - C. The narrator, a slave holder, describes her childhood growing up on a plantation in the South.
 - D. The speaker, a former slave, describes the extreme brutality she experienced under the hand of Mr. Turner, the slave master.

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

3. PART B: Choose a quote from the passage that best supports your answer to Part A.
 - A. "And put the words together, and learn by hook or crook."
 - B. "He'd have thought them greasy papers, but nothing to be read."
 - C. "Then I got a little cabin, a place to call my own."
 - D. "Knowledge didn't agree with slavery - T'would make us all too wise."

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.

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

6. PART A: Which of the following best describes the speaker's feeling about eventually learning how to read?
- A. The speaker feels scared that the slave masters will find out and hurt her.
 - B. The speaker feels powerful because she can access knowledge on her own.
 - C. The speaker feels unsure about how education will affect her future.
 - D. The speaker feels resentful toward the Yankees that set up 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" (line 5-6)
 - B. "They stood right up and helped us / Though the Rebs did sneer and frown." (line 26-27)
 - C. "But when I began to learn it/ Folks just shook their head." (line 31-32)
 - D. "The queen upon her throne." (line 44)
8. PART A: Which of the following best describes the poem's rhyme scheme?
- A. The poem is written in free verse. It does not follow a pattern.
 - B. The poem follows a pattern in the first half, then breaks the pattern in the second half.
 - C. The poem has an ABCB rhyme scheme. This pattern exists through the whole poem.
 - D. The poem has an ABAC ACBA rhyme scheme.
9. PART B: Which of the following best describes the effect of the rhythm and rhyme on the poem's overall meaning?
- A. The rhythm and rhyme give the poem a sing-songy tone, which matches the poem's not-so-serious message.
 - B. The rhythm and rhyme scheme contribute to the poem's serious, scary tone, which emphasizes the fear that the slaves felt when they were trying to hide books from their slave masters.
 - C. The rhythm and rhyme scheme is upbeat and contributes to the poem's positive message about self-empowerment, ingenuity, and independence.
 - D. Both B and C

