

**Black Beatings: Beseeking for Liberation -  
Harper's Poems**

**M. Sabaripriyan and R. Ravi**

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Courtesy: <http://msa.maryland.gov/msa/educ/exhibits/womenshall/html/harper.html>

**Frances Ellen Watkins Harper**

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper stands out amongst the earliest prominent African – American poet who was born in Baltimore in 1825. Themes of spirituality, feminism and civil rights fill Harper's oeuvre and reflects her time spent advocating abolition, education and other social causes.

### ***The Slave Auction***

The poem “The Slave Auction” refers to the brutal actions perpetrated on the victims in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The cruel and inhuman process of slave trade is presented from the perspective of the victims. The poet focuses particularly on the slave group. The poem is composed in twenty-four lines in the iambic scheme and alternate rhyme scheme. Most of the poems by Harper discuss racism, classism, sexism and equality.

The entire poem portrays the brutal actions of the white tradesmen on the slaves. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the victims were sold as slaves for commercial purpose. The feelings of the slave women child and their mothers, and relatives are portrayed poignantly, and it is worth noting that they are black people. The readers can analyze the feelings and emotions of the mother in the following lines.

And Mothers stood with streaming eyes,  
And saw their dearest children sold;  
Unheeded rose their bitter cries,  
While tyrants battered them for gold. (4-8)

The mother was standing with her tearful eyes and watching her lovable, dear and precious children were crying unwilling to leave their parents and one can see the terrible fear in their eyes. The tyrants have sold them as slaves for gold. It throws light on how the mother wants to protect her family from the domination of other people. They are fighting for the freedom with vigour. The line: “*And men, whose sole crime was their hue’s*” (1.13) can be called a kind of irony because usually the colour of skin is not a criminal action it is natural. In this case the people who had dark skin had a very big disadvantage compared to the rest of the population. Since they were used as slaves and did not possess the same rights and freedom as others.

### ***The Slave Mother***

Harper’s poem “*The Slave Mother*” was first published in *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*, in the year 1954. The poem lays emphasis on the sufferings and pain that an enslaved mother has to go through and her restricted relationship with her child. Through this poem the readers can feel the immense sadness of the slave mother. This poem is fully about the enslaved mother who goes through immense pain and suffering as a result of being away from her son. Though the passage: “*Her boy clings to her side/ And in her kyrtle vainly tries / His trembling from to hide*”, the poet conveys the deep and close relationship between the slave mother and her son. The present poem taken up for analysis is written from the perspective of a slave and the reader is given an opportunity to empathize with the slave and the life of slavery.

He is not hers, although she bore  
.....  
He is not hers, although her blood  
.....  
He is not hers, for cruel hands (17 – 21)

In this passage the author repeats the words “*He is not hers*” three times. The phrase is used as a repetition to emphasize the degree of relationship between the slave mother and her son. Despite the fact that the mother loves and desires to protect him, the harsh reality is that the son is not truly her own, the son does not belong to his mother under the bonds of slavery. The mother is faced with the constant fear that her son would someday be taken from her and sold as a slave to some plantation owner. Harper’s poem “The Slave Mother” and George Moses Horton’s “On Liberty and Slavery” have a common theme which is slavery. In the former by Frances Harper, the pain and suffering caused by slavery has been illustrated. Similarly, the latter also revolves around the theme of slavery. A slave lacks a form of freedom and equality that ought to be granted to all human beings. Horton offers readers a chance to view slaves as human beings who deserve real bliss and liberty.

### ***Bury Me in a Free Land – Not One of Slaves***

In the poem *Bury Me in a Free Land – Not One of Slaves* by Harper speaks of a person who desires to be buried outside the realms of slavery, which to the author is beyond such worldly possessions. The intensity here shows that slavery has had terrible impact on those grasped within its dark shackles, thus having the life’s blood sucked out of them. The poem allows one to sense the feeling of what goes through the mind of a person who is captured and dragged into slavery. The views in the fourth stanza of this poem are very poignant.

I could not sleep if I saw the lash  
Drinking her blood at each fearful gash  
And saw her babes torn from her breast  
Like trembling doves from their parent nest. (13-16)

This stanza brings to light the crucial images that are an integral part of slavery. Harper really pours her heart out through the words in this stanza in an appeal to others to rise up against such ‘life – threatening’ and ‘life – taking’ situations. The last stanza refers to the authors intent of being free from slavery. One feels the impact of the poem and the poet’s intent to be free; free from hate, violence, tribulation, depressive condition, and indentured servitude even in death. Harper uses different types of figurative language to convey the theme of slavery. Her powerful use of emotive language really expresses the horrendous lives of slaves to a further extent. She uses words such as “shriek”, ‘trembling’, and ‘shudder’ which forces us to see the reality of the life of a slave. Through direct language as well as through a mournful and solemn tone, she conveys the theme of slavery. Through her choice of imagery and language Harper strongly protests against slavery and morally conveys the pathos in the lives of the slaves.

### ***The Negro Mother***

The poem “The Negro Mother” was written by Langston Hughes. This poem is a lyrical poem about a Negro mother addressing her son about her struggles and suppressions in her past life. In the beginning of the poem, the poet emphasizes the usage of the words such as ‘dark’(5), ‘night’(5), ‘laboured’(11), ‘slave’(11) and ‘mistreated’ (12) to show how the black people were oppressed and subjugated especially under the pretext of racism and discrimination.

Furthermore, there is a contrast between the skin tone of African – American’s treatment and their optimistic encouragement towards their goals in achieving grand equality. The diction contributes to the hardship and the abusive situation that the narrator must face throughout the course of her struggle for freedom. From the following lines:

Three hundred years in the deepest south;  
But God put a song and a prayer in my mouth.  
God put a dream like and steel in my soul.  
Now, through my children, I’m reaching my goal. (17-20)

The readers understand the meaning that the negro mother has a strong belief in achieving their goal as freedom for their children. The mother’s elders also have faced the problems of marginalization. This is revealed in the words “Three hundred years”. They had been struggling over the past three generations for their freedom. Langston Hughes used some poetic techniques such as oxymoron, metaphors, figurative language to impart the message the narrator is trying to imply: The message that the pursuit for equality of the people should not be given up but should be pursued regardless of the hardship until absolute equality is achieved is strongly pointed out.

### ***I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings***

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a poem written by Maya Angelou which describes the conditions of the ‘free bird’ and the ‘caged bird’. Actually the contrast between the birds enables the poet to express her own emotions about freedom and isolation. In the beginning of the poem Maya Angelou’s description of a free bird by the use of a verbs like ‘leaps’, ‘floats’, ‘dips’. The free bird is a symbol of freedom and the three well-chosen verbs are especially meaningful because they contain joy and energy. This poem reveals that Maya Angelou’s writings have all deep meanings and elements of sadness ingrained in her tone.

The cage bird sings  
With a fearful trill  
Of things unknown  
But longed for still  
And his tune is heard  
On the distant hill  
For the caged bird  
Sings of freedom. (15-22)

In these lines the readers can feel the helplessness of a caged bird and learn how the bird sings for its freedom and liberty. This stanza is repeated twice by Maya Angelou to describe about her oppressed and suppressed situations.

### **The Suffering of the Black**

The suffering of the Black under the hegemony of their white superiors has been a miserable experience. Several black writers have tried to present their agony and sorrow through

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their poems. Harper, Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou stand out as leading writers who have dealt with the theme of the predicament of the blacks. The present researchers took up a few poems by these writers to study the common theme of suffering among the black. In as much as narrating the strife of the blacks poignantly the writers have succeeded in touching the conscience of the readers/ audience.

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