

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.*

[1] Very soon the Yankee<sup>1</sup> teachers  
Came down and set up school;  
But, oh! how the Rebs<sup>2</sup> 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.

[10] But some of us would try to steal  
A little from the book,  
And put the words together,  
And learn by hook or crook.

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

[20] And had his master ever seen  
The leaves up on his head,  
He'd have thought them greasy papers,  
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,



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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.

And learned to read 'em well.

[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.

[30] And, I longed to read my Bible,  
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.<sup>3</sup>

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.