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“How Wicked and Cruel this Prejudice”:

**Gender, Race and Class
In Civil War Era-related Fiction
of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper**

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Abstract

How did 19th-century American black writers construct race, class and gender? Through a focus on Civil-War related fiction of one African American woman writer, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, this paper broadly addresses black writers' treatment of these phenomena and their enduring strains in American culture.

It was found that not only does Harper emphasize race, class and gender in the fiction studied; but societal norms embedded in these phenomena seem to be the reasons for the fiction read, especially race. Indeed, she portrayed racism, "classism," and sexism as roots of great harm to individuals and to society. Harper was atypical, and images in her writing, not surprisingly, generally depart from dominant norms. The research is not generalizable, of course, but it implies avenues worthy of further study.

Gender, Race and Class

In Civil War Era-related writing of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

Although inequality marked 19th-century American society and blacks were among the most visible victims of it, little has been written about 19th-century American black writers' treatment of inequality. How did black writers construct class, gender, and race? *Class* here means a socially defined status generally linked to wealth, property and standing among members of a given community. Regarding *gender*, much of the literature emphasizes a definition based on what Barbara Welter called the "cult of true womanhood," meaning that "a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society" by "four cardinal virtues--piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity."¹ Women were seen as emotional, delicate, physically inferior, and morally superior to men,² and even independent businesswomen were judged by such attributes and acted accordingly.³ A prevailing notion of gender roles tied women to the private sphere (home) and men to the public sphere. But sources about antebellum American women overwhelmingly are about whites, and generalizations about a "cult of true womanhood" seem to ignore that women of other races existed. *Race* is here defined, following Nora Hall's discussion of Herbert Blumer, as a "social formation" based on skin color and physical traits. People "necessarily come to identify themselves as belonging to a racial group," Blumer said, calling identification by race and "the kind of picture" "a racial group forms of itself" and of others the "result of experience." From Blumer's definition, Hall concludes that "common experiences of racial discrimination may in themselves create a culture--a culture shaped by shared meanings in a particular group."⁴

Regarding *race*, *class*, and *gender*, then: in what ways did black writers of the era convey their experiences of these societal phenomena in American society? Although it seems unlikely that black Americans would embrace dominant race norms, did they see class divisions among an African American population of slaves and free blacks, house servants and field hands, educated and illiterate blacks? And, regarding *gender*, did women of color embrace the same norms as implied by the "cult of true womanhood?"

Such broad questions prompted a case study of work by one such 19th-century black American: Civil-War-related fiction by one free black woman journalist,⁵ public speaker, and distinguished pioneer in African-American literature, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper.⁶ Her writings circulated widely and she traveled extensively as a public speaker, but her audience for both was likely predominantly (if not overwhelmingly) white--at least before the Civil War ended. Although one book published in 1854 was in its 20th edition by 1871, and although she produced an array of other work in differing genres,⁷ she is best known for the novel *Iola Leroy*, published in 1892, which scholars say it is "considered a 'classic' among African American novels"⁸ and "probably the best-selling novel by an Afro-American" before the 20th century.⁹ Sources call Harper the "'journalistic mother' of emerging writers such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett, for whom she was a model and a mentor," and an influence on later black writers, including Langston Hughes.¹⁰

Francis Smith Foster wrote in 1990 that Harper was born in Maryland in 1825 to a "well-respected free family,"¹¹ and that most sources say "her mother died when she was three," and her father may have been white; an aunt raised her.¹² Friend and associate William Still wrote, in a book published in 1872, that, until age 13, Harper attended a Baltimore school, William Watkins Academy for Negro Youth, founded by her uncle, a prominent educator, minister and "fervent abolitionist."¹³ After passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, the Reverend William Watkins moved his family to Canada, and Harper moved to Ohio to become the first woman teacher at Union Seminary, founded by the A .M.E. Church, near Columbus.¹⁴ Harper soon moved again--to teach in Little York, Pa. The death of a man due to a new Maryland law compelled her to decide to devote her life to fighting slavery. The law barred free blacks from entering the state under penalty of enslavement, and a man who entered the state unaware, was arrested, enslaved and sent to Georgia, from where he escaped only to be captured and soon die of "exposure and suffering." Harper, calling his fate "a major turning point" in her life, wrote: "'Upon that grave ... I pledged myself to the Anti-Slavery cause.'"¹⁵

Harper moved then to Philadelphia, hoping to assist the underground railroad, but her help was rejected due to her age and status as “a homeless maiden (an exile by law).”¹⁶ Disappointed, she moved soon to Boston and then to New Bedford, Mass.; and in August 1854, she began a public speaking career that lasted until near her death in 1911. After that first lecture, the Maine Anti-Slavery Society hired her as a traveling lecturer, likely the first black woman hired for such purposes, Foster says.¹⁷ She traveled widely across New England, Michigan, Ohio and southern Canada, and, in 1859, epitomizing rebellion against racism, sexism and class norms, she staged her own sit-in to protest segregated streetcars in Philadelphia.¹⁸ In 1860, she married Fenton Harper and settled on an Ohio farm, becoming step-mother to his three children and later mother to their own child. Fenton Harper died in May 1864,¹⁹ and, in February and March 1865, three *Christian Recorder* items announce a speech by her in Philadelphia,²⁰ suggesting her return to an active public life. Between 1865 and 1870, Harper lectured in every Southern state except Texas and Arkansas, taught former slaves and sent items to northern newspapers urging support for Reconstruction.²¹

During this period, she published *Minnie's Sacrifice* in the *Christian Recorder*(1869); at least two other novels appeared in the same newspaper before 1890: *Sowing and Reaping* (1876-77), and *Trials and Triumph* (1888-89). Foster says that after her short story, “The Two Offers” -- “generally considered to be the first short story written by an African American,” -- appeared in 1859 in *The Anglo African* magazine, at least four serialized stories appeared before *Iola Leroy* was published as a book in 1892.²²

For this paper, two novels-- *Minnie's Sacrifice* (1869) and *Iola Leroy* (1892)--and one short story--“The Two Offers” (1859)-- were studied for treatments of race, class, and gender. These three sources were produced during a 33-year span of the Civil War era; the same themes dominate the two novels, *Minnie's Sacrifice* and *Iola Leroy*; the latter is set in the Civil War and early post-war years while the war is a backdrop and vehicle for the story of the former. Published 23 years apart--and 10 years and 33 years, respectively, after the first source discussed here--*Minnie's Sacrifice* foreshadows the more literarily developed *Iola Leroy*.

Images in the Fiction Studied

While the fiction that was studied reveals concerns about race and gender, all of it shows a writer preoccupied principally with race struggles. Harper clearly differentiated herself on the basis of race when she told an 1866 women's rights meeting: "I do not believe that white women are dew-drops just exhaled from the skies"; and, she argued, gaining the vote would not immediately "cure all the ills of life."²³ Her own life conspicuously epitomized rejection of the larger gender ideology of "true womanhood," and while one may read some of those norms in her references to motherhood, Harper portrays women as obligated to higher purposes than being extensions of men, ornaments, or romanticized paragons of virtue.

The short fiction item emphasizes gender to the exclusion of race,²⁴ but race dominates the 1869 novel—with attention to class clearly visible. In the 1892 novel, race, class and gender are so enter-twined as to be virtually inseparable—although race dominates. The short story is discussed first below.

1. Short Story: Overthrowing Gender Ideology

Implying a universality of womanhood, the short story titled "The Two Offers" conspicuously reflects images of "true womanhood" ideology. Class also figures prominently in that Harper condemned striving for social status just as she condemned the ideology of "true womanhood."

The story begins with one woman asking her cousin, "What matter of such grave moment is puzzling your dear little head....?" (This language clearly reflects gender ideology of that time and today.) The cousin said she was agonizing over two marriage offers, knowing that, should she refuse both, she risked "being an old maid," and she emphasized *that* eventuality (as everyone knew) was not to be countenanced. The first clues to author Harper's position on "true womanhood" ideology and to the story's "moral" appears when the first speaker asked whether being an old maid would be "the most dreadful fate that can befall a woman." Aghast, the cousin retorted that the first speaker knew nothing "of the grand, over-mastering passion, or the deep necessity of woman's heart for loving."

Author Harper treats upper class trappings and the “cult of true womanhood” as equally powerful roots of disastrous harm, for, ultimately, the cousin’s unhappiness and premature death are attributed to her having married the man born of wealth and status. Sarcastically condemning gender ideology, Harper says the woman had learned “that great lesson of human experience and woman’s life, to love the man who bowed at her shrine, a willing worshipper,” and she says the husband treated marriage “as the title-deed that gave him possession of the woman he thought he loved.” Harper as author asks whether “the mere possession of any human love, can fully satisfy all the demands of [a woman’s] whole being.” She adds: “You may paint her in poetry or fiction, as a frail vine, clinging to her brother man for support, and dying when deprived of it; and all this may sound well enough to please the imaginations of school-girls, or love-lorn maidens.” But to make the “true woman” happy, requires “more than the mere development of her affectional nature.”

The story attributes the husband’s neglect of his wife to trappings of social class. He drank heavily and frequented places of vice--because his mother had failed due to her own class aspirations and the ideology of true womanhood. Harper blamed that failure on a culture that “brings up” women for “trifling pursuits.”

In emphasizing the “right” role for the mother, however, Harper betrays her own adherence to parts of the gender ideology: “Every mother should be a true artist, who knows how to weave into her child’s life images of grace and beauty, the true poet capable of writing on the soul of childhood the harmony of love and truth, and teaching it how to produce the grandest of all poems--the poetry of a true and noble life.” She adds, “Home should always be the best school for the affections, the birthplace of high resolves, and the altar upon which lofty aspirations are kindled, from whence the soul may go forth strengthened, to act its part aright in the great drama of life, with conscience enlightened, affections cultivated, and reason and judgment dominant.” Notably, Harper’s adherence to parts of the “true womanhood” ideology may be clearest in the following statement: “Alas that an institution [marriage] so fraught with

good for humanity should be so perverted, and that state of life, which should be filled with happiness, become so replete with misery.”

The story’s overriding message condemns the ideology of “true womanhood,” however. The marriage improved briefly after the birth of a child that brought great solace to the wife (after all, a presumed solution to women’s unhappiness, implicit in the ideology, is to have something to occupy one-- in this case, reducing the pain of the husband’s neglect). But the child soon died, after which the long-suffering wife ultimately died of heartbreak.

The core message about gender ideology seems embodied in Harper’s description of the first speaker’s reaction to the death: She “turned from that death-bed a sadder and wiser woman,” “resolved more earnestly than ever to make the world better by her example.... She felt that she had a high and holy mission on the battle-field of existence, that life was not given her to be frittered away in nonsense, or wasted away in trifling pursuits. ... True, she was an old maid, [with] no husband [and] ... [n]o children....,” but she was not “always sentimentally sighing for something to love....”

Harper condemned equally, as noted, class trappings and “true womanhood” ideology as corrupting of the husband and his mother and as seductive: The woman felt compelled to choose the man of class--status and wealth. Especially notable, Harper used the imagery of “true womanhood” ideology to debunk it. Amid betraying traces of some affinity for aspects of that ideology, she used it to accomplish two overriding purposes: to make the fiction salable--for, to sell, fiction must be clothed in the culturally familiar--as true of the gender and class norms apparent here. Most significantly, however, Harper manipulated those familiar norms to establish a strong foundation for an argument countering them and calling into question aspirations to class over substance--for the betterment of womankind.

2. Longer Fiction: Battling Racism in Two Novels

The novel *Iola Leroy* is all about gender, race and class. *Minnie’s Sacrifice* is primarily about race and class, but one sees gender elements in the parallels between the lives of the main fictional women characters (in both novels) and the life of the author--especially in their

occupations and defiance of norms. Only the barest elements of constructions can be presented in the limited space here, and gender treatment in the novels is omitted because the discussion of the short story above reveals Harper's construction of gender.

The novel *Iola Leroy* begins near the end the Civil War, and, as slaves prepare to join the Union army, a slave named Tom rescues a very light-skinned "spunky" young slave woman (Iola Leroy, whom he clearly loves) and places her in a hospital, where she nurses sick and wounded soldiers. After Tom dies, Dr. Gresham, a white doctor in the same hospital, falls in love with Iola and proposes marriage--not aware of her race or that she had been a slave.

A flashback dominated by race and class identifies Iola's father as Eugene Leroy, son of a wealthy plantation owner, who, as an indulged youth, became ill from careless living abroad and, after returning home, was nursed to health by his father's light-skinned slave named Marie, with whom he fell in love. Unable to marry a woman of lower class, he sent her to Ohio to be educated, then married her, despite knowledge among plantation slaves and his own cousin that she a former slave. The two had three children--Iola, Harry, and Gracie--whom they carefully protected from racism and loss of class status by concealing the truth about their heritage. But fears that the children would learn it from others haunted Eugene and Marie. To protect the children, they took Iola and Harry North for education as soon as they were old enough and informed only school principals of their "mixed blood" (which meant they would be identified as black, regardless skin color).

Their fears remained unabated, however, so, to find peace of mind, Eugene and Marie decided to live abroad, where they would not have to fear racism. But on the trip North to collect Iola at her graduation, Eugene died of yellow fever and was buried en route. Marie was left to the mercy of Southerners who knew her race; they declared her marriage illegal and remanded her and her children to slavery. Eugene's cousin--mastermind of depriving Marie of her spousal rights and of consigning her and her children to slavery--hurried to bring Iola South before she could learn of her father's death and her "mixed blood." Telling her that her father was desperately ill, he took her home where she found both her mother and sister

seriously ill due to the turn of events and learned she herself was black and that all of her family was for sale. Her sister Gracie died before she could be sold.

After this flashback, the story returns to Gresham's marriage proposal at the war-time hospital. Iola rejected the marriage offer, telling Gresham her history and testing his racism by asking what would happen if they had a child with distinctive African features. Gresham, from a strong Northern abolitionist family, claimed no prejudice; but, in the clearest illustration of the powerful role Harper gives racism in the book, he did not answer while his "face flushed as if the question had suddenly perplexed him."²⁵ The same passage depicts Harper's subordination of class mobility to more basic values: Iola was tempted by the offer of "love, home, happiness, and social position." But a reader suspects that, due to perhaps a maternal urge to protect Gresham's embarrassment about his latent racism, she told him she must find her mother and that no amount of wealth and class could deter her: "Doctor, were you to give me a palace-like home, with velvet carpets to hush my tread, and magnificence to surround my way, I should miss her voice..."²⁶

The marriage proposal episode crystallizes Harper's commentary on race and class--which pervades the book's message. From that point, the story begins to weave, amid occasional flashbacks, a black extended family back together--a process that continues under post-war conditions to reconnect a community of blacks disrupted by the war. The story of Iola's brother Harry, told in another flashback, exemplifies.

In a different Northern school than Iola attended (in New England, one senses), Harry required medical treatment to begin to cope with learning he was black. After recovering, he decided to join the army and faced a dilemma about whether to enlist as black or white, but, ultimately, enlisted as black because that would help him find and rescue his mother from slavery. With Harry's story, the novel's thread of a reunification theme grows--augmented by the story of Robert, a slave introduced in the first chapter; Robert was wounded while fighting with the Union army and taken to the hospital where Iola worked. While under her care, the two learned bits of each other's history, and suspecting some family resemblances, wondered if

Iola's mother (Marie) was the sister sold away from Robert some 30 years earlier. After the war, upon returning to the "old neighborhood" and visiting old friends, Robert learns he is, indeed, Iola's uncle; he found his own mother (after 30 years' separation). And the story graphically relates racism encountered as Robert sought a place for his mother to live in the North.

Meantime, Iola, Harry and their mother Marie were also re-united. Iola, too, moved North and also faced severe racism as she sought both work and an apartment. By accident, she again met Dr Gresham, who was attending a medical convention in the same town. (He again proposed marriage and Iola again rejected the offer.) A Southern physician, very solicitous in calling attention to a brilliant young doctor at the convention, in another graphic illustration of racism, could not tolerate being near the young doctor after learning he was African-American under that very light skin. Ultimately, Iola marries the young African-American doctor, and all the family goes South to work for the betterment of the race. Iola teaches, writes and gives public speeches--as did author Harper.

Minnie's Sacrifice, a shorter novel, contains the same themes--especially the complexities of "passing" and the dramatic shift in attitudes toward slavery by those who suddenly learn they are not white, after all. The main character, Minnie, becomes the object of abuse by the slave owner's wife's after a visitor, intending a compliment to the family, gushes about how much the 5-year-old child playing in the yard resembles her father. Minnie is the daughter of a slave--and the owner, although the wife's anger ostensibly is about Minnie's attracting attention; she demands that the child be sold. The owner connives to appear to sell Minnie while actually sending her North to live with a Pennsylvania Quaker family. Minnie thus grows up believing she is white and, although she develops anti-slavery sentiments and observes underground railroad activities in the abolitionist Quaker environment, slavery is remote in the larger scheme of her life--until her natural mother found her after Union "rescues" of slaves during the Civil War made a trip North possible.

Meanwhile, another leading character in the novel, Louis, born to a slave who dies in childbirth, is rescued by the doted-upon daughter of the plantation owner because she believes

the very white baby “too pretty” to grow up as a slave and begs her father to allow her to raise him as her brother. The owner, to assure the child would mature in the “right” class to be accepted as his family, sends him North for an education. Louis grows up with strong pro-slavery views and joins the Confederate military. On a visit to see his “sister,” he learns his slave heritage, and, determining to help “his people,” goes AWOL from the Confederate army.

Minnie and Louis meet and marry—and then devote their lives to assisting African Americans.

Constructions of Class

Because race and class are presented as almost synonymous, class is constructed as (1) an inevitable caste system dependent only upon race; and (2) in a context of an inverse relationship between spirituality (the most prized asset of the African American community) or morality and material goods.

In *Iola Leroy*, the inevitability of the economic class system is best illustrated in commentary from Robert as he tells Iola, “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” (265). Indeed, this certainty is so entrenched that it is the sole purpose that Iola’s father offers for concealing the race of his children, whom he says he does not want to be “subjected to the depressing influences of caste feeling” (85). Similarly, in *Minnie’s Sacrifice*, the father scoffs at his daughter’s plea to “adopt” Louis, saying, “Who ever heard of such a thing as a Negro being palmed upon society as a white person?” Were he to “adopt” Louis, he said, “I would immediately lose cast among all the planters in the neighborhood.” Camilla, the daughter, pleads, “Oh, Pa, what do you care about social position?” (7) And in Minnie’s “new” family, her Quaker parents “dread the effect” on “the pleasant social circle with which she is surrounded” should Minnie’s connection “with the colored race” become known. (31).

During the Antebellum period, there were simply no means to circumvent the system. Blacks could shift upward in economic class only when “passing” as white, and whites would

move downward in class status generally if found “consorting” with another race. In *Iola Leroy*, Leroy, as a white man, confirms the economic consequences of marrying a slave when he remarks that, by “consorting with an alien race, [whites] robs their offspring of a right to their names and to an inheritance in their property” (60).

The inevitability of class in relation to race is further revealed when Dr. Gresham, the white man who proposed to Iola Leroy, learns she was once a slave and says this information “changes the whole complexion of affairs” (58). The revelation gives him pause as he confronts the cultural and financial consequences of marrying a “mixed-blood” woman. Gresham’s perspective on Iola Leroy shifts literally from white to black, but, eventually, his interest in her overcomes his fear of losing class status. Iola, however, refuses his proposal due to what she calls the “insurmountable barrier between us” (230). Despite seemingly the same skin color, the social perception of differences between these two is an “insurmountable barrier.” Minnie, in *Minnie’s Sacrifice*, said that learning her race meant she could no longer “pass” as white because “the prejudices of society are so strong... that I could not associate with white people on equal terms, without concealing my origin” (72).

“Passing” serves as an expedient means for blacks that appear white to move up in class. Minnie, in *Minnie’s Sacrifice*, said that, when she learned of her heritage, “at first I shrank from the social ostracism to which that knowledge doomed me” (72). In *Iola Leroy*, Army Captain Sybil tells Robert, a light-skilled black man, his opportunities would expand if he quit his black company and took a position in a white unit. Robert responded, “I would rather be a lieutenant in my company than a captain in yours” (43). In *Minnie’s Sacrifice*, Camilla tells Minnie: “You and Louis are nearer the white race than colored. Why should you prefer the one to the other?” Minnie responds, “I did not feel that the advantages of that society would have ever paid me for the loss of my self-respect, by passing as white, when I knew that I was colored; when I knew that any society, however cultivated, wealthy or refined, would not be a social gain to me, if my color and not my character must be my passport of admission.” Thus,

she said, she determined that she would be her own person “and do for my race, as a colored woman, what I never could accomplish as a white woman” (71-72).

Thus, while race is inexorably linked to class status, it is not what is valued in the hierarchical structure within the African American community. Indeed, when one is high in class status, one is inversely low on the only issues that matter to African Americans—morality and spirituality.

This inversion is most likely due to the impossibility of gaining a higher class status in the economic system at the time. With no alternative for upward mobility, African Americans produced their own caste system based on two components that did not require materials controlled by white America. By creating a moral/spiritual system counter-imposed on the economic class system created by whites, African Americans could effectively refute the validity of an economic system with the mere presence of their own system for attaining and maintaining status. Evidence of this appears in Harper’s description of Leroy as being “in the *dangerous* position of a young man with vast possessions, abundant leisure, unsettled principles, and uncontrolled desires” [italics added] (61). His position is constructed as dangerous because of his high status, which inevitably leads to spiritual bankruptcy. Iola shows her reliance on a spiritual versus an economic foundation when telling Gresham she does “not think life’s highest advantages are those that we can see with our eyes or grasp with our hands,” and asking him, “To whom to-day is the world most indebted—to its millionaires or to its martyrs?” (219) Similarly, Louis tells Camilla in *Minnie’s Sacrifice*, “All we ask is that the American people till take their Christless, Godless prejudices out of the way, and give us a chance to grow, an opportunity to accept life, not merely as a matter of ease and indulgence, but of struggle, conquest, and achievement” (73).

While not actively pursuing the caste system created by white Americans, African Americans recognized the boundaries and limitations it posed for black people’s lives. Of the Civil War, Col. Robinson states, “[T]his is a rich man’s war and a poor man’s fight” (131). While African Americans may have adhered to the spirituality-based system for status within their on

community, Harper makes clear they were profoundly aware of the penalties for not respecting the economic-based class system in place.

Constructions of Race

Harper presents antebellum African Americans as (1) loyal to their race, (2) and spiritually and morally superior to whites. Conversely, whites are (1) loyal to their race and (2) lacking in spiritual and moral resilience.

Activities of various African American characters in the novels are not contextualized as individualistic. Rather, they are presented within the framework of an entire race. For example, when Iola is rescued from slave holders, Tom is deeply indebted to those who saved her—not for saving her life but for “bringing deliverance to his race” (40). The emphasis is on the betterment of the race and not the individual. White Americans are also constructed with the same dedication to race. Dr. Latrobe, a Southern white doctor, for example, makes the case plain: “I am a white man, and, right or wrong, I go with my race” (224). In *Minnie’s Sacrifice*, Louis, struggling with internalizing the knowledge of his race, determined “he would not join [his race’s] oppressors” for “his whole soul rose up against the idea of laying one straw in its way” (61). This unity within each group ensconces the opposing extremes of a divided America.

Equally united within their races and uniformly divided as a nation, blacks and whites differed strongly on notions of superiority. This difference, one of the central reasons for continued conflict between the races—is not explicit; rather, implicitly, the point of deviation is between mind and soul. African Americans are disdainful of a white religion that could permit slavery. Robert, in *Iola Leroy*, speaks for the entire race when he says, “I don’t take much stock in white folks’ religion” (21), and Marie tells her daughter Iola, “I have not learned my Christianity from them [whites]” (107). In *Minnie’s Sacrifice*, Harper wrote, as if supplying stream-of-consciousness for Louis’ awe at blacks’ selflessness in helping him escape the Confederate army: “Faith in God had underlain the life of the race, and was it strange if when even some of our politicians did nor or could not read the signs of the times aright[,] these people with deeper intuitions understood the war better than they did” (65).

Moral superiority is closely tied to religious superiority in the African American community. For example, when, in *Iola Leroy*, Aunt Linda calls some blacks “niggers,” Robert tells her not to “run down [the] race. Leave that for the white people” (161) When, early in the text, some slaves are deciding whether to escape to the North, one says he must stay behind because he “promised Marse Robert” he would and he “mus’ be as good as my word” (19). This moral determination surpasses his own desire to be free.

Relying on a moral and spiritual base, Iola said the “time will come when the civilization of the Negro will assume a better phase than you Anglo-Saxons possess” (116). This belief comes from what she sees as immoral practices of whites and the truth of her own moral beliefs. Her ability to form this position depends on her elevated moral status. In fact, African Americans are not the only people who believe in the morality of blacks: Whites are convinced of this. Dr. Gresham says, “[O]ther men have plead his [the black man’s] cause, but out of the race must come its own defenders” (116). Given that white men controlled all forms of power, this statement reveals Harper’s construction of whites as cognizant of a suppressed power in the black community. One might also interpret this passage as suggesting blacks must produce their own defenders—not because they would be more effective than white supporters but because white supporters would not be as readily available. In *Minnie’s Sacrifice*, after hearing the story of a man who refused a bribe for his vote, despite desperate need for money to feed his family, Louis said, “I honor the faithfulness which shook his hands from receiving the bribe and clasping hands politically with his life-long oppressors. And I asked myself... which hand was the better custodian of the ballot, the white hand that offered the bribe or the black one that refused it.” He predicted a time when whites would “blush to remember that when they were trailing the banner of freedom in the dust black men were grasping it with earnest hands, bearing it aloft amid persecution, pain and death” (77-78). In *Iola Leroy*, while the Southern physician championed the brilliant young doctor before knowing his race, blacks knew the man’s race and allowed the deception to a point--just as they practiced clever deceptions throughout the book as defense mechanisms against the racist abuses (423-426).

Dr. Latrobe, who said in *Iola Leroy* that slaves actually benefited from their servitude in the United States, exemplifies the unavailability of morality in white America. He tells Dr. Gresham that “slavery has been of incalculable value to the Negro. It has lifted him out of barbarism and fetish worship, given him a language of civilization, and introduced him to the world’s best religion” (225). The reader realizes here the import of Gresham’s earlier prediction: After all, how can those who do not believe slavery is immoral possibly be available as proponents for African American freedom?

The construction of white intellectual superiority vs. black spiritual and moral superiority evolves, thus, as the most significant difference between the two races. Throughout *Iola Leroy* are examples of “knowledgeable” white men advising African Americans of “best” courses of action. For example, Captain Sybil, incredulous that the light-skinned Robert will not leave his colored troop to “pass” in an all-white Calvary, reasons that opportunities for promotion and prestige are much greater in a Caucasian unit; but he does not consider other, less “rational,” reasons that might impel Robert to remain in the all-black unit. Robert’s rejection of the idea is based on moral convictions that are better for him and for betterment of his race. He almost jokingly concludes the discussion, “[W]hen a man’s been colored all his life[,] it comes a little hard for him to get white all at once.” (43). The words of Minnie, in *Minnie’s Sacrifice*, quoted above, about why she and Louis chose not to “pass” show the same sentiments.

The mixed-race Iola ultimately merges her intellectual and spiritual self when she decides to marry (the very light-skinned African American) Dr. Latimer, claiming “there were no impeding barriers, no inclination impelling one way and duty compelling another” (271). She agreed to marry only after deciding a relationship with [white] Dr. Gresham was not feasible, given the social barriers—although she admitted some love for him. In rejecting Gresham’s marriage proposal and marrying Dr. Latimer, Iola unites the polarizing constructions of both races presented by Harper—educated rationality of whites and spiritual, moral fortitude of African Americans. Both Minnie and Iola merge their spiritual and

intellectual selves when they move to the South to work on behalf of their race (as did author Harper).

Both novels end with stress on the triumph of black spirituality/morality over white rationality. In the process of unification, Iola alludes to such a black victory when she says, "I have heard men talk glibly of the degradation of the Negro, but there is a vast difference between abasement of condition and degradation of character. I was abased, but the men who trampled on me were the degraded ones" (115). This statement suggests that Iola's (black) morality and spirituality take precedence over the (white) rationality she once treasured. In the end, Iola plainly concludes that "the best blood in my veins is African blood, and I am not ashamed of it" (208). This is a profound statement from one who at one time agreed with the institution of slavery as an intellectual white woman and then struggled as a slave after learning of her African ancestry.

In summary, the color and class lines dividing antebellum United States are immediately and constantly evident in the two novels, for Francis Ellen Watkins Harper painstakingly describes the inequalities between slave and master, white and black, rich and poor, woman and man, so a reader becomes aware of the world Iola Leroy, Minnie and Louis were forced to negotiate. The opening pages of *Iola Leroy* show unmistakable divisions as a cook, Linda, and Robert, another slave, discuss potential challenges and opportunities in possible liberation the Civil War seemed to promise. Linda notes that "Ole Miss is in de parlor prayin' for de Secesh to gain de day, and we's prayin' in the cabins and kitchens for de Yankees to get de bes' ob it" (10). From this point of demarcation in this novel and from the first scene in *Minnie's Sacrifice* describing the birth of a white baby as the black slave mother dies, constructions of race and class exponentially compound to separate the two central forces treated in these novels--blacks struggling for freedom and whites' manipulations of lives of blacks--especially those of "mixed blood"--out of fear of what that freedom might bring.

For main character Iola Leroy, who was raised as white and who defended the institution of slavery in school discussions, the revelation of her race is a "shadow" throughout

the novel. Describing Iola's mother, Marie, at her husband's death, Harper writes, "[S]he stood alone beside her dead with all the bright sunshine of her life fading into the shadows of the grave" (93). Describing Iola's brother Harry on learning he is black, Harper writes that he "was strangely silent, never referring to the terrible misfortune which had so suddenly overshadowed his life" (123). But, Iola and the rest of her family ultimately take pride in their heritage, and Dr. Latimer, a mixed-race person, discusses with Iola how "darkness shows us worlds of light we never saw by day" (273). "Shadows Uplifted," the book's secondary title, refers to Iola's ultimate acceptance and pride in her African heritage. This dignity evolves in the novel, and her unfolding personal understanding coincides with constructions of race and class throughout the book.

In the final paragraphs of *Minnie's Sacrifice*, Harper spells out the message: "The lesson of Minnie's Sacrifice is this, that it is braver to suffer with one's own branch of the human race...than to attempt to creep out of all identity with them [sic]...for the sake of mere personal advantages...at the expense of self-respect [and] we can best serve the interests of our race by a generous and loving diffusion, than by a narrow and selfish isolation which, after all, is only one type of the barbarous and anti-social state" (91-92).

Racism, the two novels' *raison d'être*, is emphasized throughout, and, after the war, characters in both discuss Southern problems and treatment of blacks. Indeed, in *Iola Leroy*, old friends from slavery days call a meeting explicitly to discuss the future of the black race in America. In the final analysis, the novels serve as a metaphor (and a warning?) of the evils of racism, although the metaphor is more graphic in *Iola Leroy*: "A family" (a nation) dismembered due to racism and re-united through much effort confronts problems left by the legacy of slavery, war, and an (inevitably) embedded racism. Thus, family equals in microcosm here the nation in macrocosm being rent by racism and "reconstructed" amid that on-going and spreading racism. In *Iola Leroy*, an irony between the blacks' "reconstruction" of family and that attempted by the nation appears in that the former began with a broad consensus emanating from the heart of one whole population--African Americans--while the latter never

rested on consensus within any significant segment of the white American population; and clear commitment to reconstruction seems to have been lacking.

II. Enduring Cultural Strains

The enduring cultural strains of race are identifiable, particularly in *Iola Leroy* where the Reconstruction Era is more directly addressed, in abundant descriptions of kinds of racial discrimination familiar today. Dr. Gresham's ignorance of his latent racism bespeaks a continuing lack of racial equality. At least, much in American history since the Civil War, including the separate-but-equal doctrine, 1960s Civil Rights movement, hiring practices, and literature like *Black Like Me*,²⁷ has continued over time to show such persistent latent racism deeply embedded in American culture. On the other hand, the Southern doctor's overt racism is also familiar today in white separatist drives by individuals and groups across the nation. Discrimination on transportation and blacks' post-war problems in finding jobs and homes similarly remain familiar--existing, in fact, in many places and pervasive symbolically in many more through such practices as racial profiling.

Further, the efforts of blacks to work together to find a place in American society continue as an embedded cultural strain. *Minnie's Sacrifice* primarily emphasizes enfranchising blacks after the war, and a brief passage at the end stresses needs for gender equality (78-81). Notably, the emphasis on education in both novels as a means for blacks to find a place in American society continues, along with an emphasis on a cohesive black community connected and solidified through the press and church. Harper's theme in "The Colored People in America" is sounded throughout the book:

"[W]omen, whose lot is unremitted labor, sav[e] a pittance from their scanty wages to defray the expense of learning to read. We have papers edited by colored editors, which we may consider it an honor to possess, and a credit to sustain. We have a church ... and the mental and moral aspect which we present is but the first step of a mighty advancement."²⁸

Discussion and Conclusion

Regarding gender, as expected, Harper's own life exemplified that she did not presume women to belong only in the private sphere, and dominant gender images in the writing studied generally counter norms of women as pious, pure, submissive and domestic or ornamental and romanticized. While Harper did exalt motherhood [but also fatherhood], she manipulated very clear imagery associated with the ideology in the short story to debunk the general framework of the "cult of true womanhood."

Regarding race, the two novels define and illustrate racism as a phenomenon, a process, and a pervasive cultural evil; indeed, both novels are especially graphic about its malevolence. The first novel seems a prelude to the more artistically mature *Iola Leroy*, which appeared after Harper had decades to reflect about the racism she had known about and experienced directly, and about its manifestations and implications for American society. Thus, while class issues are clear in the writing studied, Harper presents class as a harm intertwined with race and gender norms in American society. Although class and gender norms are not necessarily overtly tied to slavery and the Civil War, in effect, they became part and parcel of a 19th-century cultural strain that enabled increasing marginalizing of blacks in American culture through time. Constructions of blacks as "lazy" and "not capable" of fitting into American society, for example, arose from internalized convictions and overt intimations that "lower-class" upbringing prevented such amalgamation. And marginalizing of black women, in particular, arose, in part, from construction of them as having a questionable moral constitution due to the legacy of the way they were used as slaves--in a system where (it was presumed) they could not have learned a "true womanhood" ideology or how to behave according to "proper" class and gender norms.

Of course, as noted earlier, the life and work of one person cannot be generalized to a larger population. Harper's writings reflect only her views, and this paper is confined to those and to her life. But Harper's messages are powerful. Her own life, by example, and the dominant themes in the writing reviewed here are infused with dedication to elevation of the

mind and spirit of *all* people. The writing clearly suggests a duty for everyone to build a society untrammelled by racism, classism and sexism. But the same writing implies that, although the spiritually and morally superior black race have more resilience and vision in bringing this about, the white race's adherence to such norms may be insurmountable obstacles.

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Notes

¹ Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966): 152.

² Jeanine Halva-Neubauer, "The Legal Status of U.S. Women, 1783-1848" (History 5381 paper, Department of History, University of Minnesota), 1-4.

³ Lucy Eldersveld Murphy, "Business Ladies: Midwestern Women and Enterprise, 1850-1880," *Journal of Women's History* 3:1 (Spring 1991): 65-89.

⁴ Herbert Blumer, "Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position," *Pacific Sociological Review* 1:1 (Spring 1958): 3, quoted in Nora Hall, "On Being an African-American Woman: Gender and Race in the Writings of Six Black Women Journalists, 1849-1936," Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1998: 53.

⁵ Many of her journalistic articles appeared as follows: "Christianity," *Christian Recorder*, 1853; "The Colored People in America," which Foster (p. 95) says may have been the text of an early speech titled "Elevation and Education of Our People," and "Could We Trace the Record of Every Human Heart," *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, May 23, 1857; "Our Greatest Want," *Anglo-African Magazine*, 1:5 (May 1859), 160; "Mrs. Francis [sic] E. Watkins Harper on the War and the President's Colonization Scheme," *Christian Recorder*, Sept. 27, 1862;

A notable women's rights speech, "We Are All Bound Up Together," was delivered to the Eleventh Woman's Rights Convention, May 1866; the two poems, "Gone to God," and "The Dying Fugitive," appeared in *The Anglo-African Magazine*, 1:4 (April 1859):123, and 1:8 (Aug. 1859): 253-254, respectively. The short story, "The Two Offers" appeared in *The Anglo-African Magazine* 1:9 (Sept. 1859): 288-291, and 1:10 (Oct. 1859): 311-313. "Christianity," "The Colored People in America," "Could We Trace the Record of Every Human Heart," "Our Greatest Want," the short story "The Two Offers" and the poem "Gone to God" appear in Foster, ed., *A Brighter Coming Day*.

⁶ As noted later, she may have published the first short story by an African American woman, and, while the first African-American to publish a book of essays was Ann Plato in 1841 and the first to publish a novel in the United States was Harriet E. Wilson in 1859, Harper's publishing career began in 1844; Still called her "the leading colored poet" of her time, and most sources treat her as a leading literary figure of the late 19th century.

⁷ One poem ("Eliza Harris") of at least three about Harriet Beecher Stowe and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* appeared to acclaim in 1853 in *Aliened American*, *Frederick Douglass' Paper* and *The Liberator*, giving rise to her reputation as a poet. Bishop Daniel Payne reprinted two of her poems, "The Soul" and "The Dying Christian"--and cited her essays "Christianity" and "Women's Rights"--in a summary of African-American literary achievements during 1852 and 1853. The earliest extant volume of her work, *Miscellaneous Subjects*, consisting of prose and poetry published in 1854, was, by 1871, in its 20th edition. See William Still, Foster, in Andrews, Foster and Harris, 342-343; Foster, *A Brighter Coming Day*, 7-11.

She also wrote for many periodicals, including the *Provincial Freeman*, *Liberator*, *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, *Frederick Douglass's Monthly*, *Christian Recorder*, *Repository of Religion and Literature and of Science and Art*, *Aliened American*, and *Weekly Anglo African*.

⁸ Frances Smith Foster, "Harper, Frances Ellen Watkins," in William L. Andrews, Francis Smith Foster and Trudier Harris, eds., *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997): 343.

⁹ Frances Smith Foster, "Introduction," in Frances E.W. Harper, *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988; originally published: 2nd. Philadelphia: Garrigues, 1893): xxviii.

¹⁰ Foster, in William L. Andrews, Francis Smith Foster and Trudier Harris, eds., 342-343.

¹¹ Foster, *A Brighter Coming Day*, 3.

¹² Ibid., 5-6. Reporter Grace Greenwood wrote that Harper was “about as colored as some of the Cuban belles” in Saratoga, and another writer called her “a red mulatto.” Harper herself wrote that some at her lectures “debated whether she was an African-American or ‘painted to appear as one.’” Harper may have been born to a slave mother. Greenwood wrote that a “chill wave of horror” “swept” over her as she listened to Harper address an audience and realized “that this noble woman[,] had she not been rescued from her mother’s condition, might have been sold on the auction block....” In slavery, children followed their “mother’s condition,” a common reference to slave status. Harper’s “uncle” Watkins was black, but the fact that Harper carried his sir name while claiming an “aunt” raised her may indicate efforts to “hide” her slave birth-status in order to save her from slavery. Greenwood’s statement is quoted by Still (779-780) in an excerpt from her article in the *Independent*.

¹³ The school, which emphasized biblical studies, classics, elocution and political leadership, was “so well regarded that slave-holders from neighboring states enrolled their favored children”; and graduates included “many of the most prominent and highly regarded public servants and speakers in the nation.” William Still, *The Underground Rail Road: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, & C., Narrating the Hardships Hair-breadth Escapes and Death Struggles of the Slaves in their efforts for Freedom, as Related by Themselves and Others, or Witnessed by the Author* (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1872): 755-756; Foster, 7.

¹⁴ Principal John M. Brown wrote that she “firmly braved” a “flood of opposition ... from the beginning.” Foster, *A Brighter Coming Day*, 8-9.

¹⁵ Ibid., 10.

¹⁶ Foster, *A Brighter Coming Day*, 11, quotes Harper’s friend and associate William Still (p. 758) on reasons Harper was not included in the underground railroad effort.

¹⁷ Her lecture that began that speaking career emphasized race--titled “The Education and Elevation of the Colored Race.” Foster, *A Brighter Coming Day*, 11. See also Foster, in Andrews, Foster and Harris, 343.

¹⁸ Foster in Andrews, Foster and Harris, 342.

¹⁹ Foster, *A Brighter Coming Day*, 18. A notable women’s rights speech, “We Are All Bound Up Together,” to the Eleventh Woman’s Rights Convention, May 1866 gives information about her children and step-children. The speech appears in Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Women’s Rights Emerges within the Antislavery Movement, 1830-1870* (Boston, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000): 197-199.

²⁰ February 25, 1865, pp. 30 and 31; March 4, 1865, p. 34. *Christian Recorder* issues after April 1865 have not been studied for this research.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Foster, *A Brighter Coming Day*, 37.

²³ Sklar, 198.

²⁴ “The Two Offers,” *The Anglo-African*, 1: (Sept. 1859): 288-291 and concluded 1:10 (Oct. 1859): 311-313.

²⁵ Frances E. W. Harper, *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *Three Classic African-American Novels* (New York: Vintage Classics, Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc., 1990): 322.

²⁶ Ibid., 323.

²⁷ John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961).

²⁸ Foster, *A Brighter Coming Day*, 100.