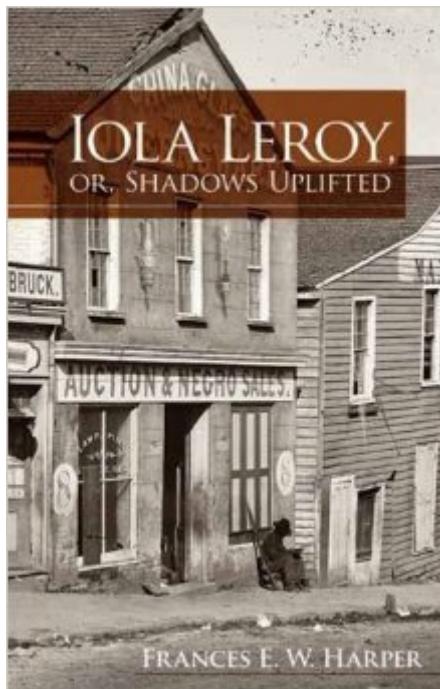


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Iola Leroy, Or, Shadows Uplifted (Dover Books On Literature & Drama)



Synopsis

The daughter of a wealthy Mississippi planter, Iola Leroy led a life of comfort and privilege, never guessing at her mixed-race ancestry; until her father died and a treacherous relative sold her into slavery. This stirring tale of life during the Civil War and Reconstruction traces a young woman's struggles and triumphs on the path to self-discovery. Confronted with the truth of her origins, Iola Leroy rejects the secrecy and shame inherent to a life of passing as white. Instead, she devotes herself to the improvement of black society in this compelling exploration of race, politics, and class. The New York Times noted that this 1892 work was "probably the bestselling novel by an African-American before the twentieth century." It bears the additional distinction of being among the first novels published by an African-American woman. Author Frances E. W. Harper, a popular lecturer and poet, was a leader in the suffrage and temperance movements and a founding member of the National Association of Colored Women. In Iola Leroy, she advocates female self-sufficiency and independence within the context of a gripping work of historical fiction.

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Customer Reviews

While it might easily be regarded solely as a criticism on slavery, Frances E.W. Harper's Iola Leroy is a novel that tackles an infinite array of issues affecting the black race, and America in general, during the late 19th century. These issues range from gender, to internalized racism among the Negro of lighter skin color, the infamous "Negro question," the hypocrisy of religion, and many

others. The most undeniable value of the book, is the call that the author makes for literacy, temperance, and the uplifting of the race. Harper, like Dubois, is optimistic about the future and potential of African-Americans. She sustains that now that the doors of education, religious freedom, and of economy and capitalism are open to the race the expectations are great both on the part of the whites and the blacks themselves. The undeniable value of the book, is the call that the author makes for literacy, temperance, and the uplifting of the race. This novel deserves extensive study not only as a feminist or ethnic work; it is one of the basic works of American Literature which can be read and enjoyed by anyone interested in social issues and fine reading material.

Harper was a major political, economic, and educational figure in the entire period from the civil war until the turn of the century. The sweep of this book is that entire period. In this way Harper is really registering what is the last in a long dialog of texts about what social power can or did overthrow slavery, and what forces are behind this. Harper's opening chapters about the slaves under slavery, the slaves during the civil war, their actual role in stopping the confederacy, the intelligence of the slaves, and all are not just idle depictions, but responses to those like Delany who felt the slaves were incapable of revolution. Harper's analysis of the strength and the struggle of the freedmen and freedwomen after slavery tends to also reply to the debate about whether they were worthy of freedom, and whether the fall of reconstruction was inevitable. At times Harper's concern for these debates weakens the plot as a modern reader would see it. Moreover, though her description of struggle through out the early parts of the book is gripping, as you gets to the close without more to offer than education and social uplift, the book also tends to seem weak to the modern reader trained to more visceral and personalized plotting. When Harper wrote, particularly in the tradition she writes, often the overall message as she delivers it, was seen so much more important than the plot. A message such as this was what the reader bought a book for then. Like *Blake and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* this is a historic document. Unlike so of those texts, this is written with hindsight from decades latter, by one of the last of the pre-civil war Black literary/political intellectuals to survive.

Iola Leroy is a novel that shows the plight of slaves and former slaves around the time of the Civil War. Through stories of several generations, Harper shows how different segments of society react to the notion of freedom. With all the turmoil and strife in this period, Harper still manages to end on a note of hope and optimism.

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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