

The controversy of
"eliza harris" by
frances ellen watkins
harper



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Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's "Eliza Harris" was written in a time where the world was an unforgiving brutal place for African American slaves. Harper uses an intense amount of emotion to try and create a sense of empathy from her readers. She is trying to instill fear and terror in her readers by describing the ugly truth and reality of the lives of African Americans in the United States during this time period. This poem speaks to the individual by humanizing the character Eliza Harris. Harper was an African American abolitionist who lived right in the middle of a time where slavery was very prominent. Even after the Civil War that ended slavery, Harper continued to fight for women's rights. By writing a piece like this Harper has a lot to lose. She may lose support of people who disagree with her, which unfortunately was a lot of people during this time period. Harper uses fear, introspective ideas making "the individual" relevant, as well as presenting her democratic ideas in a different way that made an impact on her readers.

Harper uses a fear factor to appeal to her readers sense of empathy for humanity. One example of how she does this is, "How the depths of the forest may echo around / With the shrieks of despair, and the bay of the hound?" (23-24). In this quote Harper is not only appealing to emotion but readers can almost hear the shrieks. Also, when a hound is baying it is a gruesome sound that cannot be ignored which would inevitably create a chilling reaction. After reading this it would be hard to not imagine what feelings would ensue if someone was surrounded by these noises. Harper wanted this reaction, she used heavy metrics and simple rhymes so that there was emphasis on the words that she was using. However, her writing

was still formal enough that anyone could read it and she hoped that this would cause everyone to get the same dark feeling from her writing. As people read on, it is hard to not put emphasis on the last words of each line because of the heavy metrics and word choice. This makes readers unable to ignore the severity of the problem at-hand.

Harper had a way of speaking to the individual effectively. She does this to pull the readers into her writing by making it feel like they are part of the story and are actually meeting the character, Eliza Harris. Harper appeals to people who have ever loved someone such as families and especially appeals to mothers. Eliza is willing to do anything in her power to keep her infant child from slavery. An example where Harper appeals to families and mothers is when she writes, " She heeded no danger, she paused to not think! / For she is a mother - her child is a slave— / And she'll give him his freedom, or find him a grave! (6-8). For a mother to say that she would rather her child did not live, rather than her child becoming a product of slavery speaks volumes. For white Americans that are not a product of slavery this is a way for them to understand what it is like to be a mother going through the pain and fear of the unknown regarding the future of them and their child. Any mother that has a bond with her child will hopefully feel how terrified Eliza is, this is exactly what Harper wanted to happen.

Harpers style of writing is a little different that other writings during her time because of her introspectiveness that made the speaker and subject different. In the beginning Harper says, " us", it is never clear about who us is though. It is introspective in the way that readers know what Harpers opinion is but, non-introspective in the way that the actual piece is not about <https://assignbuster.com/the-controversy-of-eliza-harris-by-frances-ellen-watkins-harper/>

Harper specifically. In this quote Harper speaks her opinion through her characters, " Oh! How shall I speak of my proud country's shame? Of the stains on her glory, how give them their name? How say that her banner in mockery waves - Her " star-spangled banner" - o'er millions of slaves?" (17-20) This is Harper expressing her opinion but putting it in her writing instead of putting her opinion out to the public using dialogue. She is basically saying, how can Americans claim that they are inclusive and claim their country is " star-spangled" if there is still millions of slaves suffering. During this time period a lot of American writers wrote in a more narrative way where the " I" was present in their writing, talking about themselves specifically. Harper defies these norms by expressing her opinion through her characters.

The way that Harper writes is almost neoclassical in the aspect that some of these lines are satirical, mocking the unbelievable nature of white American's against slaves. What makes her writing romantic is the introspectiveness and the opinion that is given in her writing. This also speaks to the way that Harper presents her democratic ideas, raising awareness about the mistreatment of African Americans in the United States. Harper presents these ideas in such a direct, definite, and satirical way that implies that white Americans are stupid to even be living this way. Harper also uses the word " us" to pull readers into her writing, when read aloud people listening will include themselves in that " us". She explains her views to show her passion for justice, in her eyes this will hopefully cause readers to feel the same way. An example of Harper explaining white American views in a way that is almost mocking their way of life is when Harper says, " A

woman whose crime is the hue of her face?" (22). This simplifies slavery in a way that makes other readers stop to think about the reason why slaves are considered "slaves". Is it really just because of their different skin color?

Why do white families treat African Americans with such poor mistreatment, but they do not treat white Americans nearly the same way? Harper writes using questions so that when "Eliza Harris" is read aloud people can hear the satirical mockery and hopefully begin to question their ways of life. This was meant to be read aloud, and it is meant to create a sense of empathy and for people to begin to question the way that the United States is.

Harper created controversy about something that was very prominent during this time against people of her race. This was a bold and very brave move on her part speaking against the norms and fighting for African Americans and women. Her use of fear, the relevant use of "the individual" and the way that she presents her democratic ideas was such a huge piece of commentary during this era. Harper was an abolitionist that was brave enough to speak her mind in her writing to appeal to people enough to start a movement that would hopefully reach enough people to get white Americans to start to change the way that they treated others.