

Subverting the Sexual and Romantic Perceptions: Black Female Identity in *Iola Leroy*

America was one of the first countries to racialize slavery, and this had a devastating impact on the state of the nation. In early attempts to justify what some thought was a “positive good”, American deities like Thomas Jefferson, who outlined perceived scientific differences between Black and white people in his “Notes on the State of Virginia”, helped perpetuate falsehoods which still exist within the minds of Americans today. Black women are historically marginalized, not only in the history that is taught in American textbooks but also through the literature. Francis Ellen Watkins Harper’s *Iola Leroy* provides a feminine lens into the experiences of Black women in the Antebellum, Civil War, and Reconstruction Eras American South and validates their lived experiences of trauma, adversity, and resilience. While she accomplishes this task through fictional circumstances, there is significant historical context that impacts the text of the story.

Francis Ellen Watkins Harper was born in 1825 in Baltimore, Maryland to free Black American parents, although they died when she was young, and she was raised by her aunt and uncle. She was well-educated and developed a passion for writing in school. She began teaching in her twenties, and she moved to Pennsylvania to pursue teaching at a school there. Around that time, Maryland passed a law that would discriminate against free Black Americans and threatened to sell them into slavery. This motivated her to begin fighting for the anti-slavery movement, and she joined abolitionist circles, as well as began writing for them (Alexander).

Iola Leroy was published in 1892, and it grapples with issues from the Antebellum, Civil War, and Reconstruction Eras by jumping through different times and perspectives in the book. The main narrative focuses on Iola’s experience of being kidnapped from the North, her subsequent enslavement and then rescue by the Union Army, and then her service as a nurse.

There are also narratives of before and after the war and the familial circumstances in each period, like her mother Marie's relationship with Eugene, as well as the later discovery that Robert Johnson, one of the wounded soldiers that she is caring for, is her uncle. The novel concludes with a reunification of the family, likely to appeal to public opinion at the time, even though that was not a reality for all separated enslaved Black families after the end of the Civil War.

The relationship between enslavers and the enslaved in the nineteenth century United States is difficult to describe because it was often different in each circumstance, and it cannot be generalized. However, there was always an abuse of power, as well as a violation of human rights that is necessary to emphasize. Eugene Leroy is Marie's enslaver before he becomes her husband. It is imperative to examine this relationship and investigate the origins of his romantic feelings and marriage towards her, as well as stress his ownership of other enslaved people even after their marriage. He says that he grew to love her because,

During the long months in which I was convalescing, I was left almost entirely to the companionship of Marie. In my library I found a Bible, which I began to read from curiosity, but my curiosity deepened into interest when I saw the rapt expression on Marie's face. I saw in it a loving response to sentiments to which I was a stranger. In the meantime my conscience was awakened.... She was faithful when others were faithless, stood by me when others deserted me to die in loneliness and neglect, and now I am about to reward her care with all the love and devotion it is in my power to bestow. That is why I am about to marry my faithful and devoted nurse, who snatched me from the jaws of death. (Chapter 9, Harper)

Eugene claims that his love of Marie emerged after she nursed him back to health, but there is an implicit acknowledgement of the lighter color of her skin. He professes that he chose to educate her at a school in the North where she hid her identity as someone who was Black. It feels necessary to ask: would he ever have developed feelings towards her if she did not resemble a white woman? Additionally, while he grew to love Marie and helped educate her, he did not make efforts to help alleviate the struggles of the other enslaved people that he owned. He did not make an attempt to free them or see them as different people, despite his wife's anti-slavery views. Moreover, what are Marie's feelings for Eugene? Does she love him, or was her marriage towards him an attempt at exerting a form of agency over her own life?

A substantial fear during the nineteenth century United States was that Black and white people would have children with each other and that this would result in *race mixing*. In Jefferson's piece, "Notes on the State of Virginia," he writes, "Among the Romans emancipation required but one effort. The slave, when made free, might mix with, without staining the blood of his master" (3). There is an obsession with blood that appears strange in *Iola Leroy*. The historical consequence of this is clear through the ideology that existed at the time-- that it was not only the color of skin that was a difference between white and Black, but it was a biological distinction. When Eugene informs his cousin, Alfred Lorraine, that he is going to marry Marie, Alfred does not react well to it. He informs Leroy that he thinks that he is losing his mind and just because Marie has light skin does not mean that she is not still "a negro." Leroy responds, "Oh, come now; she isn't much of a negro." to which Alfred says, "It doesn't matter however. One drop of negro blood in her veins curses all rest" (Chapter 9, Harper). There is significant historical context accompanied by this: the "one-drop-rule" had existed in the United States since 1662. It originated in Virginia, and it defined that if someone even had a distant ancestor who

was not white, then they could not claim that they were (Bradt). Additionally, there was worry expressed by Jefferson that was echoed not only by those who were pro-slavery but also abolitionist opinions in the nineteenth century United States. Jefferson writes, “But with us a second is necessary, unknown to history. When freed, he is to be removed beyond the reach of mixture” (3). He is concerned about how Black Americans would enter and be a part of society in the United States upon their freedom. This helped to characterize debate on gradual or immediate emancipation because it was difficult for white and Black Americans to visualize, albeit for different reasons, a United States that gave both Black and white people equal rights.

White enslavers could relentlessly assault their enslaved Black women. While this was not true in every circumstance, it was a reality for many Black women who were enslaved. Yaba Blay posits in “How the ‘One Drop Rule’ Became a Tool of White Supremacy”, “Essentially, if a white man were to impregnate a Black woman, the law took him off the hook; he did not have to support or even claim that child. At best, if the mother of the child was his property, he gained not a child but additional property and another source of labor and income. Thus, the law inadvertently sanctioned the sexual abuse of enslaved women.” This is considerable historical context, but it is equally consequential to note that some Black women were able to exercise a form of agency over these circumstances. In *Iola Leroy*, we do not know the state of Marie’s mind when she makes the decision to marry Leroy. However, once she is married to Leroy, she makes her opinions known to him about the state of enslaved Black children who are deemed illegitimate by their white fathers. She remarks on her own children:

‘Oh, how glad I am,’ Marie would often say, ‘that these children are free. I could never understand how a cultured white man could have his own children enslaved. I can understand how savages, fighting with each other, could doom their vanquished foes to

slavery, but it has always been a puzzle to me how a civilized man could drag his own children, bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh, down to the position of social outcasts, abject slaves, and political pariahs.’ (Chapter 10, Harper)

It seems absurd that politicians in the nineteenth century United States claimed to be concerned about the assimilation of freed Black Americans into society and emphasized their intellectual inferiority when for over a century white enslavers had been living side-by-side with their enslaved children. Marie does not feel afraid to call out the hypocrisy of these conditions.

During the sectional crisis of the 1850s, there were a series of events and pieces of legislation that led to the secession and ultimate war between the North and South of the United States. The Founders, like Thomas Jefferson, had hoped that slavery would eventually die out and chose not to address it when writing documents like the Constitution. Even so, the language that they utilize in the text of the founding documents indicates their disapproval of the institution of slavery. James Oakes writes in *The Scorpion's Sting: Antislavery and the Coming of the Civil War*, “Hadn’t the men who drafted the Constitution deliberately refused to recognize slaves as property? Was it merely an accident that the fugitive-slave and three-fifths clauses of the Constitution referred not to property but to ‘persons held to service’?” (61). For a period of time, compromises negotiated between representatives of the different regions had served as an adequate stopgap to address the issue of slavery expanding into the territories, as well as the political power that would provide. In the Missouri Compromise of 1850, the North agreed to help better enforce the Fugitive Slave Law, which served as a tipping point. When Eugene Leroy dies in *Iola Leroy*, his relatives make use of the white supremacist views in the South and urge a judge to declare his marriage null and void, as well as his will that would have secured his wife and children’s livelihood. His wife is forced back into the life of an enslaved person, and Iola, his

daughter, is kidnapped by Louis Bastine, who does not tell her that her father is dying, but rather that he is ill. She is assaulted by Bastine while resting in a chair: “she was awakened by a burning kiss pressed on her lips, and a strong arm encircling her. Gazing around and taking in the whole situation, she sprang from her seat, her eyes flashing with rage and scorn, her face flushed to the roots of her hair, her voice shaken with excitement, and every nerve trembling with angry emotion” (Chapter 12, Harper). In response to her indignation and disgust, Bastine essentially tells her to calm down and refers to her as “my lovely tigress.” By comparing her with a female tiger, he is equating to her a bestial animal, falling into sexualized stereotypes of Black women. Additionally, he is dismissing his blatant assault of her. Moreover, he labels her as his, expressing his ownership of her body. Just previously, when discussing her kidnapping with Camille Lecroix, Bastine had romanticized her light-skinned features, declaring “‘She is a most beautiful creature,’ said Louis Bastine. ‘She has the proud poise of Leroy, the most splendid eyes I ever saw in a woman's head, lovely complexion, and a glorious wealth of hair. She would bring \$2000 any day in a New Orleans market’” (Chapter 12, Harper). He takes pleasure in her ignorance of her own Black identity, as well as depicting her desirable features like traits to be sold--even going so far as to imagining how much money he could make off of selling her.

White northern abolitionists were not always devoid of racism, and Black Americans did not have equal rights in the northern states. “Northern blacks were citizens, but as with women and children, citizenship did not entail the right to vote or hold public office. Some northern blacks could vote, but most could not. Segregation was widespread.... There were significant limits to how far racial egalitarianism went in the northern states, even among many of the most vocal opponents of slavery” (Oakes 82). It is important to keep this in mind when analyzing the relationships that Iola and other characters had with white Northerners because the North is very

easily portrayed as the generalized “good guy” in the Civil War, when that is not necessarily the full picture. When Iola is freed by the Union Army and begins working as a nurse, she attracts the attention of Dr. Gresham. When he proposes to her, she objects, specifying a multitude of reasons as to why their potential marriage could never be possible. She details to him the circumstances of her upbringing, to which he responds, “I love you for your own sake. And with this the disadvantages of birth have nothing to do” (Chapter 13, Harper). He makes no attempt to disagree with her about the status of her birth, and despite his declaration of his love for her, he falls into societal stereotypes from the time. She also underlines the shame and societal disapproval that would accompany their marriage that she would not want to subject him to. She laments, “New England is not free from racial prejudice, and I would never enter a family where I would be an unwelcome member” (Chapter 13, Harper). He attempts to dissuade her worries, but he does not say that she would be free to tell his mother about her Black ancestry. Instead, he alludes to the fact that since she is light-skinned; she can act as if she is white. She refuses to renounce her Black identity, even though it may have been an easier life for her if she had chosen to do so. Moreover, she asks him, ““suppose we should marry, and little children in after years should nestle in our arms, and one of them show unmistakable signs of color, would you be satisfied?”” (Chapter 13, Harper). Dr. Gresham is stunned by this overt inquiry, and he does not know how to respond. This further reveals his desire to marry her only because she appears to be white. Iola finally dismisses his proposal with the statement that she cannot marry until she has found her mother.

Iola Leroy is a powerful piece of literature that gives credence to the experiences of Black women, often contrary to the way that their stories are treated throughout history. With the additional knowledge of the historical circumstances that they were living in, it is a much more

multifaceted and engaging piece of work. Environmental factors that influenced the political and social environment, like the public perceptions of the Founders, one-drop-rule, Slave Power, and Fugitive Slave Act, allowed white southerners to establish a system of white supremacy and endanger the lives of Black Americans. Black women were especially marginalized, but this book does not take advantage of that. Instead, it lifts up the voices of Black women and puts them in positions of power. When they face adversity, they demonstrate intellect and resilience. It is vital that we continue to elevate stories of Black women like *Iola Leroy*, whether or not they may be labeled fictional, because they hold historical consequence.

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