

The Two Offers

QUICK REFERENCE

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's "The Two Offers" was first published in the *Anglo-African Magazine* in 1859 and is considered the first published short story by an African American woman in the United States. Harper provides no racial dimension to the characters, and the thematic purpose of the story is to challenge contradictions inherent in social values regarding women's roles and to offer an alternative to those conventions and traditions. In this regard, the short story suggests strong similarities between black society and white society, as sexism dominates both social spheres. At the same time, it indicates the gender solidarity that existed in the radical abolitionist community and the feminist themes women activists, such as Harper, espoused in their literature.

The story concerns two cousins, Laura and Janette, who consider two offers of marriage extended to Laura. Though cousins, they represent two different classes, one of privilege and the other of poverty. By juxtaposing their class differences, Harper uses economic contrast to suggest that gender perspectives are related to class consciousness.

In particular, Laura feels she must marry or face the fate of becoming an old maid. Janette, on the other hand, is unmarried and has forsaken tradition to keep her independence and to pursue a writing career. In this regard, Janette parallels Harper, who was unmarried when she published the story. Even though Harper married in 1860, she continued to write and to lecture against slavery. Janette, the feminist protagonist, completely rejects the role of woman as wife and mother, and her name, Janette Alston, alludes to Jane Austen, the nineteenth-century English writer.

Janette advises Laura to refuse both proposals because her indecision indicates a deficiency of affection for either of the two men. She also states that for Laura to marry for economic reasons relegates the bond to a business arrangement, which defiles the sanctity of the union. Janette's analysis is a provocative challenge to the economic bondage that many women faced during the nineteenth century, in which marriage offered security and class status, and, conversely, a kind of enslavement.

Ten years later when the cousins reunite, Laura is gazing into death's gaping mouth, having suffered a possessive, repressive marriage to a man who violated their vows and acted as if the marriage contract were a bill of sale. In response, the omniscient narrator reflects the feminist politics of Harper and the women's movement, criticizing society's denial of "the true woman," whose "conscience should be enlightened, her faith in the true and the right established and scope given to her Heaven-endowed and God-given faculties."

Harper's rejection of romantic illusions and her advocacy of women's independent spirit are not a wholesale rejection of marriage, as Janette does commit to an egalitarian union. Harper's intention is to dispel romantic attraction and emotional manipulation as determinants for marriage. Moreover, the theme illustrates how inequitable unions lead to spiritual demise and, in this case, to heartbreak and actual death. But the contrast between the two women represents the real two offers: independence, autonomy, and life, or oppression, depression, and death.