

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Miracle Worker by William Gibson

## Book Information

William Gibson, The Miracle Worker

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122 Pages

Book Level: 5.2

Interest Level: UG

This book presents William Gibson's play about teacher Annie Sullivan's determined quest to give twelve-year-old Helen Keller, blind, deaf, and mute, the gift of language.

**Award:** NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts

**Topics:** Canadian Content, Canadian Content (All); Community Life, Helping Others; Disabilities, Vision Impaired/Blind; Family Life, Growing Up; Popular Groupings, College Bound

## Main Characters

Annie Sullivan the young woman sent to the Kellers to be Helen's teacher

Aunt Ev Helen's aunt, who pushes the Kellers to get help for Helen

Captain Keller Helen's father

Helen Keller a young girl who becomes blind, deaf, and mute as the result of a childhood illness

James Keller Helen's step-brother

Jimmie Annie's younger brother

Kate Keller Helen's young mother, who tries to help Helen by indulging her

Percy and Martha Viney's young children

Viney a servant in the Keller home

## Vocabulary

**desiccated** wrinkled from age

**nonplussed** confused or puzzled

**obstinate** stubborn

**precocious** advanced in social or mental development

## Synopsis

This play begins as little Helen Keller comes down with a high fever. The doctor believes she will recover nicely but almost as soon as he leaves, her mother, Kate, discovers that Helen cannot see or hear. Living in a time when there is little help for a deaf, mute, and blind child, the Kellers keep Helen at home and raise her the best they know how. When she reaches the age of about six, they realize she has become violent from her silent frustration, and they need to find help for her. Mr. Anagnos suggests that a governess be sent to help care for and teach Helen.

Though she has had some troubles of her own, Annie Sullivan is chosen for the task. She recently had surgery to restore her vision and her eyes are very sensitive to light, so the other children at the school where she has lived give her a parting gift of smoked glasses. They also give her a new doll for Helen. With her gifts she heads off to meet this child whom no one knows much about. Upon arriving at the Kellers' house, Annie takes Helen to her room and gives her the doll. Annie also gives Helen her first lesson in finger spelling. The lesson comes at a price, however, as Helen rebels by hitting Annie and locking her in her room.

Annie's first experiences with Helen and the Kellers teach her that Helen's biggest handicap is the leniency and pity her family gives her. In order to teach Helen discipline, Annie requests that she be given complete control of Helen with no interference from family members. Reluctantly, the Kellers agree to allow Annie to live with Helen in the garden house without interference for two weeks. Annie struggles valiantly to teach Helen manners and the names of the objects in her world. She succeeds in teaching Helen to live like a human rather than an animal, to use utensils to eat, to keep herself neat and clean, and to follow Annie's orders. At the end of the two weeks, however, she has not been able to teach Helen that objects and people have names. Helen merely mimics Annie's hand movements out of obedience. Annie begs to be allowed one more week, but the Kellers cannot bear to be away from

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Helen any longer.

On the evening of the fourteenth day, Helen is reunited with her family. They plan a wonderful dinner to honor her return. At the dinner, though, Helen attempts to return to her former wild ways at the table. When Annie tries to intervene and not allow the behavior, Kate and Captain Keller balk. They want to allow it just this one time. Annie knows that if Helen is allowed to misbehave this time all her work would be lost. After a brief power struggle with Captain Keller, Annie is allowed to take control of the situation. She takes Helen outside to the water pump to refill the water pitcher, which Helen had dumped in defiance. While they are refilling the pitcher she spells the word water into Helen's hand, and Helen finally understands. She says "Wah-wah" and is overjoyed with her new understanding of the world. She runs from object to object seeking their names. Ultimately, Helen understands who Annie is and what she has done for her. As a gesture of her love and trust she gives Annie the keys to the doors in the house. It is clear that Helen is on the road to connecting with her world.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

## Initial Understanding

Captain Keller tries to explain how difficult it is for Kate to be separated from Helen and how the situation has affected Kate. Why is Helen's disability emotionally difficult for Kate, and why is it difficult for her to watch when Helen finally begins to understand the world?

*When a baby is born his or her parents usually have great expectations for the child. Kate is no different. Helen had been born a normal child and tragically lost her sight and hearing after she was already beginning to understand the world. This is difficult for any parent to watch, especially if he or she does not know how to help the child. In Kate's day there are very few places or people who would try to teach Helen, and Kate knows that despite appearances, Helen is still an intelligent child. Even though it is difficult to care for Helen, Kate still misses her when she cannot touch her. And when she sees Helen begin to bloom again, she realizes it will eventually pull Helen further away from her.*

## Literary Analysis

Even if the author had not told when this story was set, the reader should have been able to make a reasonable guess as to the time setting. What are some of the clues that suggest the time period of this play?

*It takes Annie many days to travel from Boston to Alabama. The dark glasses Annie wears are referred to as smoked glasses rather than sunglasses. Some of Annie's things are packed in a trunk. Annie refers to the place where she and her brother grew up as an "asylum." Also, Annie travels on trains and in carriages.*

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## Inferential Comprehension

The Kellers cope with Helen's outbursts by giving in to her demands. This usually calms her for a time and makes their lives easier. Annie does not like this and explains that it is not helping Helen, but harming her. How are their ways actually causing Helen's behavior to become worse?

*When Helen is allowed to do whatever she wants, it is, in effect, rewarding her for her bad behavior. It harms her by teaching her to throw tantrums in order to get her way. If the Kellers reached a point when they could no longer care for her, Helen would have likely ended up in a home where she may have been tied to a bed or a chair for control, and she may have been thought to be mentally impaired forever.*

## Constructing Meaning

Though many people believe losing the sense of sight or sound would be devastating, not everyone agrees which sense would be more difficult to live without. Which do you feel would be more difficult to live without? Why?

*It could be argued that loss of sight is more difficult to overcome since blind people are challenged by trying to move about a dangerous world without being able to see what is happening around them. Others may feel hearing would be harder to overcome since few people know how to communicate with the deaf. They also may argue that deafness is more dangerous since deaf people would not hear noises warning of danger.*

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Literary Features** A play is a unique format in which to tell a story. It often must be told with limited scenery and actions. Also, movements of characters and delivery of the lines are guided by stage directions. Have your students read several more short plays to get the feel for the writing form and then have them choose and perform a scene from one of the plays.

**Extending Meaning** In this play there are hints of

the stereotypes that exist about the Irish, Northerners, and Southerners during this time. Have the students find the places the author made use of these superficial judgments of different characters. Have them identify the stereotypes and their flaws. Then discuss the negative effects of stereotypes on society.

**Recognizing Details** In the days when this story took place, society did not deal with disabilities very well. They often just "warehoused" people in asylums and did little more than keep them alive. Many times they even physically and verbally abused these people. They also did not handle orphans very well either. Many children grew up in the same situation that Annie described. Research the development of the social services systems. Follow the progress of what has been done to improve life for these people, and generate ideas for further improvement.

**Responding to Literature** It is very difficult for an outsider to understand the world in which Helen Keller lived or the frustrations and obstacles she faced. To help your students further identify with her, have them experience a period of time without their hearing and sight. Have them wear blindfolds and earplugs for a short time while receiving the help and support of classmates. Ask them to share what they felt during their experience and how they tried to cope with these conditions.