

ASF Study Materials for

THE MIRACLE WORKER

by William Gibson

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THE MIRACLE WORKER

by William Gibson

Characters

in Tuscumbia, Alabama:

Captain Keller, *Helen's father*

Kate Keller, *his second wife, Helen's mother*

James Keller, *his son by his first marriage*

Helen Keller, *blind and deaf since a toddler*

Aunt Ev[eline], *the Captain's sister*

A Doctor

Viney, *a black servant*

Martha } *servants'*

Percy } *children*

at Perkins Institute, Boston:

Mr. Anagnos, *head of the Institute*

Annie Sullivan, *a recent graduate*

Blind girls, *students at Institute*

and offstage voices

Time: The 1880s, mostly spring of 1887

Setting: In and near the Keller home, Ivy Green, in Tuscumbia, Alabama, and briefly at The Perkins Institute for the Blind in Boston

Images: Several images herein are from American Foundation for the Blind via its educational use provision; <http://www.afb.org> and from Perkins Institute website, <http://www.perkins.org/history>

Welcome to *The Miracle Worker*

The challenge of writing historical drama is that we all know the ending and something of the major characters, so raw suspense does not drive the action so much as a sense of watching *how* the events happen. William Gibson dazzled the genre with his 1959 award-winning play, *The Miracle Worker*, dramatizing a superb All-American story of a young woman and a child who face immense challenges and triumph. The action is as physical as *Rocky* and as intensely language-based as the recent film *Arrival*—and the climax comes down to the understanding of one word.

People usually consider *The Miracle Worker* to be "the play about Helen Keller." While Helen is indeed the play's focus of energy and the miracle happened within her, the actual *worker* of the miracle is Annie Sullivan—the play is about Annie Sullivan with Helen Keller. Gibson puts Annie's presence, her practice, her values, and her candor at the center of the action; she drives the play just as she drives the quest to give Helen language and the chance for a full life.

Annie's quest for Helen is for what makes us human—not just the human shape, but understanding, language, ideas, heart and mind and soul. Helen's access to her "humanity" left her in a sudden jolt, and the being who was left she herself wrote of as "Phantom," a thing living in a "no-world" of "thwarted desire and temper." No wonder she called the day Sullivan arrived in Tuscumbia "the birthday of my soul."

The idea of teaching as a gift and learning a miracle has never been so simply nor so eloquently demonstrated as in the story of Annie Sullivan's meeting with Helen Keller. The child's life gains knowledge and thus opportunity and a future in which to explore it. And once we know the life stories of both women, we realize the worker of miracles is just as remarkable as the child and woman she taught.



The well pump at Ivy Green, Helen Keller's childhood home in Tuscumbia, Alabama, with cottage near the house in background

"I left the well-house eager to learn. Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house, every object I touched seemed to quiver with life."

—Helen Keller, in *The Story of My Life* (1904)

About These Study Materials

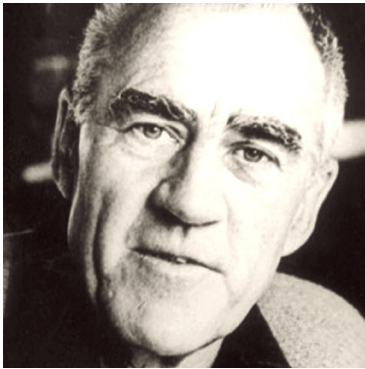
These materials and activities can be adapted to suit any grade level and contain:

- background information about the major figures
- analysis of the play's structure and character development
- discussion questions about character
- analysis of issues and imagery
- historical context about the education of children in the 19th century and the education of the blind and deaf
- a post-production worksheet

Activities appear in green boxes.

THE MIRACLE WORKER

by William Gibson



Playwright William Gibson

William Gibson, Playwright

Like many writers, William Gibson, a native New Yorker, waited for fame to recognize his work, and in his case his faith more than paid off—or as he put it, "Good things come to those who wait ... far too long."

In the mid-1950s his first novel was bought by MGM and made into a film. At that point he could have had a career as a screenwriter, but he decided he was not a committee-style writer; he stuck to playwrighting. Good move.

In 1958 he premiered his first play on Broadway, *Two for the Seesaw*, starring Henry Fonda and Anne Bancroft in her debut role. He followed this the next year with an adaptation for the stage of a teleplay script he'd done, *The Miracle Worker*, again starring Anne Bancroft and introducing Patty Duke as Helen Keller in a stunning performance. They both revived these roles

in the film version of the script three years later, which Gibson adapted.

The Miracle Worker won him a Tony for the script and won both Bancroft and Duke Best Actress and Best Supporting Actress Awards. The actresses also won the Academy Awards for their film performances, and the screenplay was nominated for an Oscar.

Gibson's subsequent plays included the book for a musical version of Clifford Odets's *Golden Boy* (1964), a play about the young William Shakespeare (1968), a play about the Puritan Anne Hutchison (1980), and a sequel to *The Miracle Worker* called *Monday after the Miracle* (1982), along with a one-woman play about Golda Meir that became the longest running one-woman Broadway show in history. Born in 1914, he died in 2008 after a long and successful career.

How True Is This "History" Play?

We tell stories of the past to learn about it, to learn from it, and to shine light on our own world and experience, to see it more clearly or from another angle. The tradition of the history play, from the ancient Greeks through Shakespeare to *Hamilton* today can add a filter or a rhythm or a perspective to raw facts, and the very act of presenting facts in a biography of any sort means "shaping" it.

In her later life Helen Keller had strong values and championed causes aplenty, from the needs of the disabled to the needs of workers, from women's suffrage to antimilitarism, but in this play as a 6-year-old she battles only to have what she wants—and she does not yet realize what that is. The person who does realize her deeper needs and wants is the person she's fighting, Annie Sullivan.

The contests in the play seem intensely dramatic, so it is easy to assume Gibson hyped up the events, including details of

Keller's illness or Sullivan's own childhood. Not so. Gibson has not only done a great deal of good research, but has also used it faithfully, especially since the words he draws from are usually those of Helen Keller and Annie Sullivan themselves.

The two central participants in this incredible tale both wrote about it, Sullivan in letters to a friend in Boston during the events, and Keller, once she mastered language, in a number of books, primarily *The Story of My Life* (1904) and later in *Teacher* (1954).

So appreciate that many of the points made and all the physical contests in this play are essentially true to how they occurred. Gibson did tighten the time line slightly, but since the entire timeline of the major action from Sullivan's arrival in Alabama to the breakthrough is less than five weeks, the tweaks are almost invisible. With a play so faithful in its main plot, this time we can trust a great—and true—story

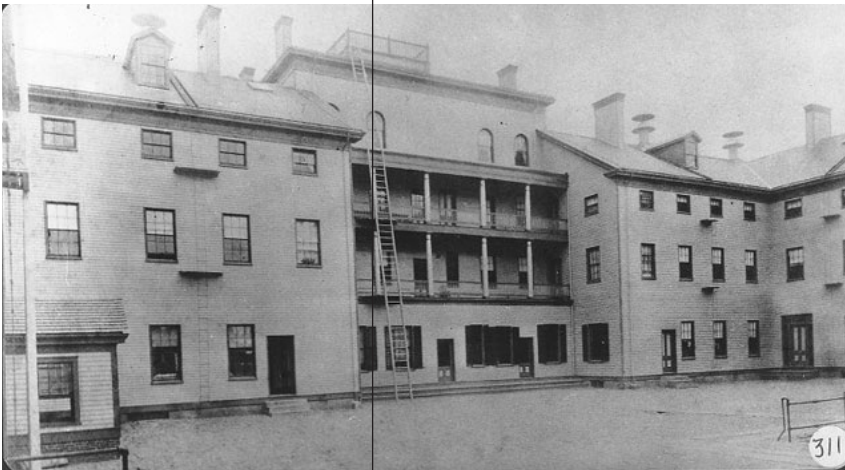


Tuscumbia, Alabama

THE MIRACLE WORKER

by William Gibson

Tewkesbury Almshouse where Annie Sullivan lived from age 10 to 14.



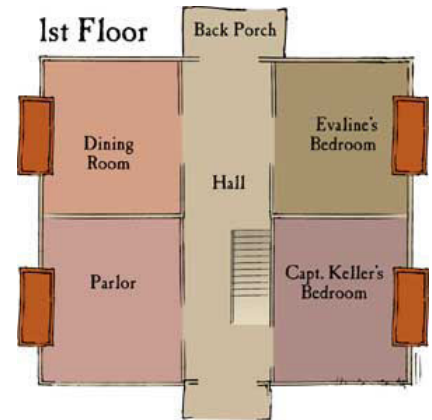
Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller: Picture Their Childhoods

The two famous women whose first meeting this play narrates share early childhood time on a farm and some experience in a small cabin. Beyond that, they grew up in different social strata, which in 19th-century America, perhaps as now, meant in different worlds.

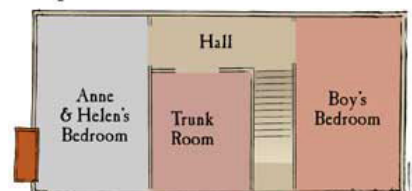
Helen Keller's birthplace is on the National Registry of Historic Places. Annie Sullivan's birthplace is lost to history, but her family lived in extreme poverty. Sullivan was born in a village outside Springfield, MA, then moved to "a dilapidated little cabin" on an uncle's farm for two years after her mother died. Once her father abandoned his remaining children, "home" became the Tewkesbury Almshouse, the poorhouse, an appallingly run institution where, after her younger brother Jimmie's death, Annie was alone amid diseased or socially outcast adults. It was not a green or nurturing world; she and her brother had played in the "deadroom," the morgue.

* * * * *

Helen Keller's early years were spent at Ivy Green in Tuscumbia AL, on what was the family's estate after the Civil War. A realtor today would list it as a bungalow, 4/0—4 bedrooms, no bathrooms, detached kitchen. Nearby was a one-room cottage in which the Captain and his second wife had lived when first married, and to this cottage Annie Sullivan took Helen for isolation in her early work with the child. The home was a green world full of gardens and flowers as Keller recalls in her autobiographies.



Upstairs



Ivy Green, where Helen Keller was born and lived for the first seven years of her life. After that, she was educated and lived in the Northeast. Left is the cottage to which Annie Sullivan took Helen to focus the child's attention on learning.

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"Fellow graduates: duty bids us go forth into active life. Let us go cheerfully, hopefully and earnestly, and set ourselves to find our especial part. When we have found it, willingly and faithfully perform it...."

—Annie Sullivan's
1886 commencement
address at Perkins



ANNIE SULLIVAN Timeline

- **1866:** born to poor, illiterate Irish parents in Massachusetts
- **c. 1871:** contracts trachoma, a recurring infection that irritates and scars the cornea, causing vision loss
- **1874:** her mother dies
- **1876:** sent to poorhouse at Tewkesbury with younger brother Jimmie, who dies
- **1880:** illiterate, she asks to go to school; sent to Perkins Institute for the Blind
- **1886:** she graduates as valedictorian; prepares for her first teaching job
- **1887:** March 3, meets Helen Keller; April 5, Helen has language breakthrough
- **1888:** takes Helen to Perkins and several other schools
- **1904:** Helen graduates from Radcliffe College with Annie finger-spelling lectures
- **1936:** "Teacher" dies after a life helping Helen Keller's career writing, lecturing, traveling, and supporting the cause of the disabled, workers, and women

The First of Two Remarkable Women: Annie Sullivan

What Did Annie Sullivan Overcome?

We all know that Annie Sullivan "miraculously" taught blind, deaf, mute Helen Keller language. We tend not to know how Annie Sullivan's life brought her to that moment and the many trials she overcame to get to there. In order to save Helen, she first had to save herself and find her own means of expression, thanks to some good teachers, and her task was daunting.

Annie Sullivan's parents were desperately poor, illiterate Irish emigrants from the Great Famine. Her father's only skills were drinking and fighting; her mother had tuberculosis. Two of their five children died in infancy; another, Jimmie, had a tubercular hip. Annie (b. 1866) suffered trachoma when she was five, which, left untreated, began to destroy her vision. No Sullivan children went to school.



Annie Sullivan at 15 while at the Perkins Institute for the Blind

At The Poorhouse

After her mother died when Annie was 8, her father soon abandoned home and children. When an uncle could no longer care for them, she and Jimmie were sent to the state poorhouse at Tewkesbury. Nearly starved and uncared for, as were all the nearly 940 inmates, the children were housed with the ailing elderly women, contagious and non-contagious together. Another ward housed prostitutes; another, unwed mothers, though most of their infants soon died.

Jimmie lived only 3 months there, leaving Annie in severe grief. During her four years at Tewkesbury, she had two failed eye operations as her sight deteriorated; a third blurred her remaining vision enough to nearly blind her, but she clung to one small hope—someone told her about a school for the blind. She was determined to get there.

As a committee investigating conditions at Tewkesbury was leaving, she spoke up, her voice being her one hope and one weapon, "Mr. Sanborn, I want to go to school!" The men asked some questions, and on October 7, 1880, she found herself at Perkins Institute for the Blind.

At Perkins Institute for the Blind

She took two ill-fitting calico dresses along with her "shame, defiance, and impudence" to Perkins. She was 14 and could not read or write; her "ignorance" was laughed at by younger students, though she knew life as they did not. Her "spitfire" outbursts and attitudes more than once nearly got her expelled, but several teachers championed her. Two more eye operations at last helped Sullivan's sight enough that she could read. Once able to learn, her intelligence shone.

While there she befriended blind, deaf, mute Laura Bridgman, the breakthrough teaching of whom had made the school's fame. Bridgman taught Sullivan the manual alphabet for the deaf so they could converse by finger-spelling.

After Sullivan graduated as valedictorian in 1886, the head of Perkins forwarded her a governess request from a Mr. Keller who had a blind, deaf, mute 6-year-old daughter. For six months Sullivan studied the methods used to teach Bridgman, then the 20-year-old headed south. She proved to be a creative, responsive teacher who freely adapted Howe's rigid methods to Helen's interests, liberating her mind.

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HELEN KELLER Timeline

- **1880:** Helen born June 27
- **1882:** 19-month-old Helen deafened and blinded by an undiagnosed intense fever
- **1886:** the family seeks advice of a Baltimore oculist, who recommends Alexander Graham Bell, whose wife was deaf; he recommends they contact Mr. Anagnos at the Perkins Institute. He contacts Annie Sullivan.
- **1887:** March 3: Annie Sullivan arrives in Tuscumbia, AL
March 7: battle at the breakfast table
March 9: move to cottage
March 16: Helen docile
March 27: return home
April 5: breakthrough at well pump, "w-a-t-e-r"
- **1888:** Sullivan takes Helen to Perkins Institute
- **1890:** to Horace Mann School for the Deaf in Boston for voice lessons
- **1894:** at Wright-Humason School for the Deaf in NYC for two years
- **1896:** in MA studying for Radcliffe entrance exam
- **1900:** admission to Radcliffe
- **1903:** Helen's autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, grows out of a class assignment
- **1904:** Helen graduates and begins writing, lecturing, advocating, and traveling
- **1968:** Helen Keller dies



Radcliffe graduation, 1904, the first deaf-blind person to get a college degree

The Second of Two Remarkable Women: Helen Keller

Because of Annie Sullivan's own experience, when she arrived in Tuscumbia she saw a child few others perceived—a very bright, curious girl instead of the semi-wild Helen many family members thought might be better off in a mental institution. Helen was trapped without language; Sullivan herself knew something of that entrapment. Helen's family wanted a private teacher, and in what looked like a raw, inexperienced, very young woman instead they got the woman best suited to the task, with the ideal experience and insight to address Helen's education creatively.

To help Helen, Sullivan had to get Helen's attention, which meant teaching discipline even before language. From Helen's perspective, later recounted in her tribute to Sullivan, *Teacher*, her life to that point had been "all want, undirected want—the seed of all the wants of mankind that find their fulfilment in such a multitude of concrete ways." Then she learned.

First she learned names to express her wants but without reflection or context. But Sullivan finger-spelled to her all day about everything, and soon she learned verbs and questions, concepts such as *where*, *how*, *why*, as the world transformed and gained meaning. The people and surroundings she had experienced now took dimension, and "that flood of delight in restored companionship was the real wonder of those early days and not Helen's misnamed 'phenomenal' progress in capturing language as a fully formed instrument."

After the Moment at the Pump

Almost immediately Sullivan gave her back laughter and play, since as Keller reports, "Helen had not laughed since she became deaf." Sullivan tickled her, then they romped—"jumping, hopping, skipping, and ...in a few days Helen was another child, 'splashing radiant joy.'" Sullivan had the wisdom to give her life, childhood—not just individual words but the reason for words. Keller later realized Sullivan offered her the childhood she herself had never had.



Helen with Annie Sullivan, 1888

It was a free, unregimented exploration of what there is to be learned (the kind we, in our need to label, might call Montessori).

Sullivan fed Keller's voracious curiosity, then she took her away from the family confines to school, first at Perkins for the blind, where she learned Braille and made friends, and then to schools for the deaf to learn speech amid other new friends. Because Sullivan had seen the "success" of Laura Bridgman who had no support outside of the Perkins Institute, she enabled Keller to function more broadly. When Keller sought more education, Sullivan facilitated her prep work for the admission test to Radcliffe and then facilitated her course work there, attending every class with her and finger-spelling the lectures and demonstrations, arranging special touch sessions of exhibits so Helen's sensitive hands could perceive details. It often goes unnoted that Sullivan also thereby got a Radcliffe education, even though she got no diploma.

With Sullivan's and later Polly Thomson's support, Keller dedicated her life to writing, speaking, and travel, a life of advocacy—advocating meaningful lives and employment for the disabled, equality for women, better lives and conditions for the workers of America and the world, all those whom society had in one way or another "disabled" from a full life.

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"Language is to the mind more than light is to the eye."

—Annie, Act 1
quoting Dr. Howe



Explore These Seeds Planted in Act 1 Dialogue:

- Doctor, saying the sick baby will live: "You're a pair of lucky parents."
- "She's tryin' talk," as Helen puts her fingers on lips and in mouths of other children conversing
- "I've stopped believing in wonders," says the Captain.
- "She wants the doll to have eyes," Aunt Ev, as Helen plays with new towel doll.
- "How can I get it into your head, my darling, my poor— [then Kate Keller to Captain]... How can you discipline an afflicted child? Is it her fault?" setting up the contrast to Annie
- "Dr. Howe did wonders, but ... he never treated them like ordinary children."
- [to Helen, who puts key in well] "You think I'm so easily gotten rid of? You have a thing or two to learn first." Contrast to end of play with pump and nature of future.

What's Historical in Act 1

The paper dolls, playing with the black children, fingers in their mouths, towel doll/ buttons for eyes, cradle moment, writing doctor, garnet ring, doll for Helen, meeting train for two days, feeding Helen sweets, about Howe's practices, Helen with bonnet, spelling *doll* first, Spanish monks, *cake*, imitate first, Annie locked in

Structure and Character in *The Miracle Worker*—Act 1

William Gibson's artistic choices for shaping the script are partly driven by history because the play's climax is a given: it must be the scene at the pump. Now how to get there, how to mine the conflicts that drama needs and tell the full story of the family, the child, and the teacher who changes their lives.

Again, history is a help with the relationship between the young Helen and the new teacher Annie Sullivan. This isn't a musical. She is a young, visually-challenged, purpose-driven Irish woman who knows what needs to be done and means to do it, if possible. So—the first meeting, then the process of learning the problems and beginning to address them, i.e. the discipline aspect, and finally getting to the language moment of enlightenment. It's a three-act play; it practically shapes itself.

Except there's more to it, and the family relationships are where the fleshing out shows structural artistry. Gibson tweaks history a bit, making Captain Keller more curmudgeonly, playing up the older man/wry younger wife dynamic, and especially mining the step-situation of Captain Keller's second marriage with a son from his first marriage in the house. The sparks fly between father and son, thus creating a useful and artful subplot cognate to the Helen/Annie relationship.

Structural Choices in Act 1

Let's consider some choices Gibson makes for the action:

- Rather than simply report the past, the "givens," he goes back in time to open the play by showing the other most dramatic moment in the story—the discovery that the baby has been blinded and deafened by the fever.
- Having quickly established the problem, he jumps 5 years to a dysfunctional family—the wild child who needs help and the family that does not know how to give it. This establishes the NEED.
- He then balances the need at Ivy Green with the ANSWER: Annie in Boston.

her need for a job, and her farewell to the school that has been her life for the past several years, her step into the unknown, her gambling on herself. This farewell to the known/step into unknown will be paralleled by Helen at the end as a result of Annie's skill, for Helen will leave the known wilderness of solitude and enter a future of language. We also get the flashback scene of Annie with Jimmie at the poorhouse, so she has a nightmare past as do the Kellers and Helen.

- Then the arrival/meeting: first at the train with all the expectations, then at Ivy Green, where Annie first sees Helen and begins to study her reactions, learning the hard way about Helen's sharp responses when she locks Annie in—a major image that parallels her own state.

So the family has to get Annie out of her room before Annie can get Helen out of her wordless solitude. To the family, for the moment, Annie seems like another problem rather than a solution. The act ends with Annie solving the "where's the key" mystery by watching Helen and also stating her own determination.

Character Issues Established

- Helen is curious, aware and acts out violently; no socialization; has made up signs/minimal communication
- Assertion of paternalism, but authority will bend to wife and sister, which sets up ...
- Male/female authority issues that will extend to parents vs. Annie
- Father/son strife, authority issues
- Family's long-term dysfunction due to Helen's condition
- Annie's past with brother haunts her
- Annie's forthrightness and strong will vs. need for job

So internal issues, interpersonal issues, family issues are all set out in Act 1.

THE MIRACLE WORKER

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"Now all I have to do is teach you one word. Everything."

—Annie, end of Act 2

Explore These Seeds Planted in Act 2 Dialogue

- Annie of Helen: "There's nothing impaired in that head."
- "Obedience is the gateway through which knowledge enters the mind of the child."
- "...we lost Vicksburg because Grant was one thing no Yankee general was before him...obstinate."
- "It's less trouble to feel sorry for her than to teach her anything better, isn't it?"
- "This girl, this—cub of a girl—*presumes!* ...She's a *hireling!*"
- "Say what you like, Kate, but that child is a Keller."
- Annie remembering Perkins report: "Can nothing be done to disinter this human soul? ... Is the life of the soul of less import than the life of the body?"
- "I only today saw what has to be done, to begin!"
- Annie: "I want control of it."
- Annie: "It's my idea of the original sin ... giving up."
- song: "Hush, little baby. Don't—say a word—"

What's Historical in Act 2

Annie's letters, Perkins report quotes, teach like talking to a baby, Captain Keller at Vicksburg, breakfast table battle and results, talk of deadhouse and school at Tewkesbury, Annie's sense of need to live separately, Helen's response, Percy's role

Structure and Character in *The Miracle Worker*—Act 2

Notice that the three-act structure tells the age of the play; today the action would be written in two acts. Through time play structure has evolved from five acts to three to two and more recently even to one 90- or 100-minute unbroken act. (Of course, in its first teleplay form, the act breaks would have been for commercials.) In breaking the action into acts, a playwright needs to give each act a strong finish, called a "curtain" moment, even though many theatres no longer use curtains. Act 1 ended with Helen feeling triumphant over the newcomer Annie, hiding the key in her mouth and disposing of it down the well—a mouth focus and pump/well focus that piques the viewer for the anticipated end of Act 3, and the image of a key here is potent: Helen herself is locked in, and the entire idea of the play is to unlock her, to let *her* out.

A middle act deepens and complicates conflicts, making some strides, enduring setbacks, and facing new issues, leaving the larger issue still unresolved. One of the problems Annie identifies is the effect of the family's love and pity for Helen; this is Annie's "tough love" act.

Structural Choices in Act 2

- Ambiguous time lapse, but not long after Act 1. Use of letter for Annie's private thoughts, where she establishes GOAL for the act: obedience. Discussion of how Annie will teach.
- Breakfast is round 2 between Helen and Annie (the instant test of obedience). Annie insists on the manners the Kellers want and must struggle with both them and Helen: "leave her alone with me"—the demand Annie will make twice in this act.
- Father/son breakfast debate about Civil War/Battle of Vicksburg is set up for coming battle between Annie and Helen at the table, a messy battle that Yankee Annie wins.



- Aftermath of breakfast battle: Kate cries at news of change; desperate repressed hope, links to later mention of Helen's early speech, *wahwah*; then Annie gets out her suitcase without a word—suspense: is she giving up?
- Annie's packing sets up the confrontation in the garden house later that night. The Captain is dissatisfied with her undignified methods, then challenged by Annie's dissatisfaction with family. This longer scene links the Kellers' hope vs. asylum possibility to Annie's past in asylum and her clear assessment of what needs to happen—then, both Captain and Annie try to set conditions for the deal that is a challenge: OK to separation, but only for two weeks.
- In garden house Annie sets out her strategy: use appetite, here not taste but intellectual, Helen's curiosity.
- Before we see that play out, we get a father/son confrontation and a physical arm wrench, after which Kate tosses the Captain's question to Annie back at him: "Do you like the child?"—a fine subplot echo/parallel.
- Now for the Helen/Annie confrontation that has been set up. Annie cleverly uses jealousy as a wedge to gain Helen's renewed responsiveness. Annie's power and perception—and patience—seem formidable, and the song at the end restates in lyric and more loving terms the "I'm not so easily gotten rid of" that ended Act 1.

Character Issues Developed

- Annie's intelligence, determination, stability, and dedication begin to seem "Sherman"-like (image set up/used)
- Parents/family love for child vs. Annie's job—which trumps and how
- Echoes of brother Jimmie, "It hurts to be dead. Forever" haunt Annie and refer to Helen as well
- Annie's past in asylum revealed; one option for family discarded by Annie
- Father/son tension escalates

THE MIRACLE WORKER

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"Water. W, a, t, e, r.
Water. It has a—
name—"

—Annie, Act 3

Explore These Seeds Planted in Act 3 Dialogue

- "I need a teacher as much as Helen."
- Annie: "I'm learning to spell."
- "We're born to use words."
- "We miss the child. I miss her. I'm glad to say, that's a different debt I owe you—"
- Annie (note verb tense shift): "I wanted to teach you.... I won't take less!"
- Annie: "To let her have her way in everything is a lie, to *her*.... You've got to stand between that lie and her.... Because I will."
- "And Jacob said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me."



Letter "W"
in the manual
alphabet for the
deaf, the first
letter of water

What's Historical in Act 3

Time in garden house teaching obedience, Annie's letters (all letter quotes are accurate, though sometimes shifted sequentially), how does a bird learn, request for more time and denial, dog visiting cottage and Helen smelling him, Helen spelling into dog's paw, Helen throwing napkin on floor, Annie trying to remove her and their protests, Helen spilling pitcher, out to pump and "the moment," asking name for Annie

Structure and Character in *The Miracle Worker*—Act 3

The two-week separation deal began at the end of Act 2; it is ending at the top of Act 3 with better obedience but no language understanding yet. Was it for naught? The answer is the conflict of Act 3 because it depends on whom you ask, the family or Annie. The family is satisfied; Annie is not—she is just beginning the real objective. For her and Gibson, the GOAL of the act is language, understanding. Is that possible when the return to the house puts all the relationships into crisis mode, reviving earlier tensions and destabilizing what Annie's accomplished? Of course it is; that's why the play is built this way—to make us fear and hope, to long for rather than see the ending we know must come.

Structural Choices in Act 3

- The two weeks have passed, and today is the return to the house. Gibson teases us—the first word Annie is spelling to Helen is *water*, then *egg*.
- The Kellers are eager for the return, but all realize life has been normal without Helen there.
- James opens up to Kate Keller, seeks her help in his fractured relationship with his father.
- Annie tells Kate obedience isn't enough and by finger-spelling asks for more time; Kate's fingers respond *no*. There is finger-spelling communication though not agreement here; we see that the finger-spelling works to communicate ideas, decisions, thought.
- The Captain is satisfied—Helen is now a human child; Annie disagrees.
- Again Gibson teases us as Helen tries to finger-spell the word *water* to the dog. Captain compares teaching Helen to teaching a dog and revives Annie's earlier comment about house-breaking. Captain, with pay, implies Annie's job is largely accomplished.
- Helen leaves with Kate, and Annie washes her eyes, the only private moment we see her tend them.
- Back home at the table Gibson reprises

Act 2's table manners conflict as tests of both Helen and Annie and for the demands Annie makes. Kate, as she did in Act 2, releases Helen to Annie; the Captain insists on his own way, letting Helen do as she likes.

- With Helen's next set of acting out, Annie grabs her and they leave the room. James confronts and tells his father he's wrong—the crisis for this relationship, the reverse of the Captain's use of force in Act 2. Here the Captain hears and sits, a genuine change, and a hopeful one for the larger action of the play, which is...
- Annie and Helen at the pump, the moment we've been waiting for. Gibson is wise enough just to do it now—the water, the finger-spelling, the insight—the miracle occurs right before our eyes.
- In a showy theatrical comment on the moment, Gibson has Helen grab the bell rope as she eagerly returns to the house, so the sound effect is wildly celebratory (and the stage direction asks for offstage chimes to ring, too).
- Three more quick but significant moments seal the ending the play—1) Helen asks who Annie is: *teacher* (which her entire life was Helen's term for Annie). 2) Helen gets the keys from Kate and gives them to Annie, a symbolic gesture of who can unlock, open. 3) Annie spells "I love Helen" and adds "forever" without haunting voices arising. We are good to move into the remarkable future these two women will have (as we reach for more Kleenex, which is also intended).

Character Issues Resolved

- Annie's approach to teaching Helen is vindicated and succeeds
- Father/son tension shifts, may resolve
- Kate and family realize Helen can be fully human, can learn and "speak"
- Annie moves past the haunting voices to love another child

THE MIRACLE WORKER

by William Gibson



Annie Sullivan at the Perkins Institute for the Blind



Her parents' hoped-for vision of Helen—as a sweet, obedient child

Note: Because Helen's left eye protruded, she was usually photographed in right profile. Later, as she became a public figure, doctors removed both eyes and gave her glass prostheses (for medical and "cosmetic" reasons).

Character Analysis in *The Miracle Worker*: Annie & Helen

ACTIVITIES with CHARACTER

These questions can be answered individually or in pairs or groups for discussion or writing/journaling and can work as viewing prompts for attending/viewing the play.

Annie Sullivan:

Background:

- In the past the historical Annie has endured dire poverty, neglect, institutionalization in the poorhouse, deaths of family, near blindness, illiteracy, and social scorn from peers and teachers. Assess how each of these might affect or help to shape her character.

How many of these influences are in the play? How? To what effect?

- Annie's parents were illiterate Irish immigrants who fled the Great Famine. Her mother and brother died of TB; her father abandoned the surviving children. How might that affect her character?
- Jimmie and memories—Her younger brother Jimmie was sent to the poorhouse with her, and his death there scarred her. What effect do the memory sections of the play, the haunting voices of the past, have on our understanding of Annie's character? How does this private dynamic affect our view of her and her inner conflicts?
- While at Perkins, the historical Annie Sullivan was known as "Spitfire." Does Gibson include that aspect of her character in the play? If so, what effect does it have? Is it useful?
- In the Perkins Institute scene, Annie seems highly regarded and loved by her fellow students. How does that compare/contrast with how she is viewed in Alabama when she arrives?

In Alabama:

- At various times, Annie is perceived as too young, too pushy, too "Yankee," too unaware of being a "hireling." She is seen as a rival for affection, a challenge to authority, as insensitive, incompetent, and also as Jacob fighting the angel. What do each of these perceptions respond to in Annie, what do they tell us about the perceiver, and how true is each? How many of these traits are assets for her?
- What does Annie want and how does she go about getting it? What are her methods? What are her principles? What are her motives?
- Does Annie's character change in the course of the play? If so, what is its arc? If not, why not?

Helen Keller:

- Does Helen have "character" or has her condition left her undeveloped? Why or why not? How would members of her family answer that question?
- Helen's entire spoken dialogue is only one syllable (repeated three times), but her physical presence and its expressivity are eloquent. What does her physicality tell us? Pick an example or two and discuss what it reveals. Do we see what Annie sees in Helen?
- What does Helen want and how does she go about getting it? What are her methods? What are her principles? What are her motives? Why?
- How does Helen's character change in the course of the action? Why? Implications?

THE MIRACLE WORKER

by William Gibson



Captain Arthur Keller



James Keller,
the older of Helen's two
half-brothers (the other is
not in the play)



Kate Keller, c. 1900

Character Analysis in *The Miracle Worker*: The Kellers

Captain Keller:

- What does Captain Keller assume about his position in society and the family? Is that challenged in the course of the play? How does he respond?
- What does Captain Keller want and what are his methods of pursuing it?
- How does Captain Keller respond to the women in the play? How does he get what he wants? How do they get what they want from him?
- Does Captain Keller change in the course of the play? If so, what is his arc? If not, why not?
- To what extent does Captain Keller seem a stereotypical authoritative man who blusters his orders but then eventually listens to the womenfolk? Is he well-rounded as a character or more of a type?

Kate Keller:

- What tensions does Kate Keller feel as wife and mother/stepmother in this play? What does she want? What challenges her as she tries to get it?
- Does Kate change in the course of the play? If so, what is her arc? If not, why not?
- How does Kate try to negotiate conflicts between other characters? What are her "weapons"? What are her methods?
- Is Kate a "steel magnolia"? Is she the genteel Southern lady and loving mother who gets exactly what she wants with sweetness and tact? Can she control this situation?

James Keller:

- How does the son/stepson role define James's character? How does he react to the "new" family? What is his role in the action?
- What are the issues between James and his father? How does each respond to the other?
- James often seems to understand Annie and to back her efforts. What do they share? Loss of a mother? Need to be recognized? Why might James understand Annie?
- James can be opinionated and seem snarky but is also very perceptive about situations. When is he right and how does he express it? Is he ever wrong? Why does he see what he sees in situations? Consider his calling Annie "general" and Helen "angel."
- Does James change in the course of the play? If so, how? If not, why not?

Aunt Ev:

- Aunt Ev exhibits concern for the child and family pride. How does she maintain each and to what effect?

Viney, Martha, and Percy:

- Are the black servant characters two- or three-dimensional in their portrayal? What role does Gibson give them? In history, Helen Keller remembered the children as always being kind and playing with her. Is their attitude in the play more like the Kellers', more like Annie's, or more parentally instructed behavior? Or are they just kids?

THE MIRACLE WORKER

by William Gibson



Helen with a dog that may be Belle (Helen Keller loved dogs and had one all her life). But why is there a dog in the play? How is she used?

Values and Society

Consider the following dichotomies and the values associated with each side by various characters in the play and what/who they refer to—and also how Gibson uses them in the play:

- Yankee/Confederate (rebel)
- male/female
- seeing/blind
- competent/incompetent

What is Captain Keller's view of the world? his assumptions about the world? Compare those with Annie's view of and assumptions about the world. Why might they have different views? What do we learn from the differences?

Considering Issues and Images in *The Miracle Worker*

ISSUES

• Power figures

Compare the areas of authority and power for Captain Keller and Annie Sullivan. How does each assert authority? To what effect?

• Parental view of children

Captain Keller seems dissatisfied or disappointed with two of his children, Helen and James, for different reasons. How does he treat each? What does he want? Does he perceive their needs or does he insist on behavior? How does each child behave toward him?

Compare James's role to Helen's role; how like Helen is James? Is James like anyone else? Compare the way Annie treats Helen to the way the Captain treats James.

• Expectations

Compare the effect of being labeled, pitied, or left unchallenged and its effect on one's development and image *versus* how one can be challenged to be more, to be "human" in the play. Who gets labeled or pitied for "what s/he is"? Who gets challenged? How? Why? To what effect? Who "sees"? Who doesn't?

What larger issues about society is Gibson engaging with this portrayal?

• Love vs. Protection vs. Freedom

Compare/contrast Kate Keller's struggle with loving and protecting Helen and wanting more for her and/or wanting to solve the dysfunction she contributes to with Annie's goals and demands of Helen—and Kate. What does each woman see in Helen and what does each want? How does she try to get it?

IMAGES

• paper dolls/ dolls (with and without eyes)/ baby Mildred/ Helen

How does the presence and treatment of a doll work as an image for treatment of humans or human relations in the play? How and in how many ways does Gibson use the image?

• Helen putting on Annie's shawl, hat, glasses

Here "becoming" Annie is superficial, donning or expropriating clothes, but in how many ways is it important that Helen "become" like or reflect Annie?

• the key/unlocking or locking in

How does this frequently used image express major concerns in the play?

• feeding Helen sweets

How does this image reflect the family's general attitude to Helen?

• the discussion of the Battle of Vicksburg and Civil War references

How does the view of each side of the battle of Vicksburg describe the "battle" over Helen going on? How apt is each side's assessment of the battle?

• having a chick hatch in Helen's hand

How indicative is that image for the larger action?

• Jacob wrestling with the angel blessing

How apt is James's blessing to the larger situation? to how many situations?

• the five senses

If Helen is blind and deaf, how evident are her other three senses? How does Annie use them? How do others? How much of the cottage action/dialogue depends on Helen's not hearing or seeing?

• What other images did you notice?

THE MIRACLE WORKER

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Helen Keller and Annie Sullivan studying to enter Radcliffe, 1898

Analyzing History & Imagery

- Research the Battle of Vicksburg (1862-3) to see how it works as an image in the play.
- How does the Battle of Vicksburg illuminate the issues between the Keller father and son?
- How does a Civil War battle illuminate issues after the war between a young northern woman of impoverished Irish background and a formerly upper middle class Southern family (the second Mrs. Keller of even higher status; she had been a Memphis belle). How many tensions operate here? Why?
- Research what Helen Keller and Annie Sullivan did after 1887-88—how did they use their abilities? Compare Laura Bridgman's use of skills with Helen Keller's—what made the difference?
- Research educational and job opportunities for the physically challenged in your community. What could Helen Keller do in your community if she lived there?

The Battle of Vicksburg and the Home Battle in Tuscumbia

In the play, disagreeing is the major form of communication between the Keller men, and the first major subject we hear them disagreeing about is the Civil War's Battle of Vicksburg. Moreover, that disagreement occurs at the top of the breakfast scene in Act 2 that will introduce the first major battle of wills between Annie and Helen and the first battle for command of approach between Annie and the Keller parents. Civil War history sets up Helen's uncivil behavior and Annie's "Yankee" context. (Captain Keller already called her a Yankee in his 8th line upon seeing her at the end of Act 1.)

About Vicksburg

In the Civil War, the port of Vicksburg, Mississippi on the Mississippi River was a vital link between the halves of the Confederacy for both goods and troop transport.

Byspring, 1862, it was the Confederacy's only remaining railhead on the east bank of the river after Memphis and New Orleans were lost to the Union. The city was garrisoned with soldiers and the bluffs overlooking the river fortified with artillery.

The Union wanted to cut those Confederate water and rail links, and General Grant spearheaded the effort from the west—the Vicksburg victory began his climb to commander of Union forces by the next summer. Having beaten the Confederates under Van Dorn at Corinth in the summer of 1862, Grant now faced Gen. Pemberton, who had never before commanded a force in battle. Grant's victory was only a matter of time.



Grant had the Confederates outnumbered, but needed to get his troops across the river south of the city, and after scrapping four plans he managed it. Pemberton had thought Grant was withdrawing, and when he learned otherwise he ignored his commander, Gen. Johnston's, orders to join forces and instead marched east, lost a battle, then tried to cut Grant's supply lines to no avail.

In three weeks, Grant's men marched 180 miles, won five battles, and besieged the city with 77,000 men. Johnston proposed a feint to allow Pemberton to escape, but the message got lost since Grant had cut the communication and rail lines. On July 3, 1863, Pemberton surrendered the city and Grant captured 6,000 prisoners—at the same time that Lee was losing at Gettysburg, two losses which became the turning point in the war.

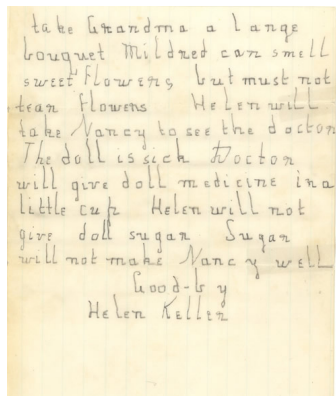
About the Tuscumbia "Uncivil" War

The topic at breakfast is Grant, whom James claims "outthought us behind Vicksburg" and "beat us." His father disagrees, calling Grant a butcher and a drunk, and asserts that "we lost Vicksburg by stupidity verging on treason." James adds that Grant was obstinate in taking Vicksburg; he tried four times to move his men, and the fifth attempt worked. Keller just longs for "Old Stonewall" instead of a "half-breed Yankee traitor like Pemberton—."

Comparing this discussion to the events immediately following, we realize Annie Sullivan, the only "Yankee" in the house, is most obstinate and commanding, telling the family their pity has caused the problem of the "badly spoiled child," not helped it. Keller is enraged and wants her fired, but she then achieves the larger objective—it takes all morning, but Helen eats with a spoon from her own plate and folds her napkin. Annie wins this battle for Helen's soul and immediately re-groups for the next. James calls her "general."

THE MIRACLE WORKER

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Part of a letter Helen wrote by herself in the style called squarehand using a grooved board, c. 1887-8, the year she first learned language.

Being both blind and deaf, Helen learned English and then communicated with it in three different alphabets—the English letters (as above), the manual alphabet for the deaf, and the Braille alphabet for the blind. During her education she also studied Latin,

Views on Children and Education in the 19th Century

At the same time children were suffering from the impact of the Industrial Revolution, forced into long hours of factory work running machines or sent into mines for 12- to 14-hour days (boys and girls underground with adult men), the combination of Romantic idealization of childhood innocence, a concern for religious and social indoctrination, and Victorian protectiveness and social propriety in the separate world of the nursery sometimes gave children a stern and rigid existence, depending on the nature of the caregiver.

Sermons, poems, and art “portray the child as a bastion of simplicity, innocence, and playfulness. Women were also praised for embodying these qualities [the Angel of the House image], and together with children they were urged to inhabit a separate sphere: to withdraw from the workforce, embrace their status as dependents, and provide the male breadwinner with a refuge from the dog-eat-dog capitalist world outside the family.”



The upstairs room at Ivy Green that Annie Sullivan shared with Helen (Helen's single bed is out of shot to the right). It was common in the 19th century for governesses to live-in to oversee children 24 hours a day. A tutor did not always live in but taught during certain hours.

Despite being seen as innocent and pure, children were also considered to be savages, which justified the use of harsh discipline at home and throughout society. Strictures were necessary to shape their malleable natures. Schooling regularly involved corporal punishment, and there was no discussion, no argument; they were taught the one way to think and behave. Victorian concerns for children were health, cleanliness, godliness, and self-improvement.

Girls played with dolls and were encouraged to make them new clothes and accessories to improve their sewing skills (sewing being one of the major requirements in a girl's training, both a “necessity” and an “accomplishment”).

In *The Miracle Worker*, notice how high the expectations for Helen's behavior are and how happy many family members are with her achieving obedience and propriety—folding her napkin—with less concern for inner life or intelligence. Notice, too, how often Helen already sews or knits; these are skills she is immediately moved toward to be a “normal” girl, skills that were taught all young women, along with music and other “graces” that could improve the aesthetic ambiance of a man's home.

Note, too, in *The Miracle Worker*, how few of these traits were part of Annie Sullivan's upbringing until she was 14 and went to Perkins. If Annie rarely subscribes to Angel of the House values herself, she does know what society expects, including the Kellers, but her subsequent early education of Helen involved a free-style curriculum quite unlike anything then practiced in a school. She was originally hired as a governess (note the implications of *govern* in that title), but more like Mary Poppins, she fit explorations and fancy into her lessons, and her charge grew into an Angel of a very different sort, a strong woman of generous spirit, firm mind, and eloquent expression who gave of herself to others in need her entire life.

THE MIRACLE WORKER

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Educating the Blind and Deaf in the 19th Century

It was long thought the blind and deaf could not be educated, until the 19th century proved the efficacy of education for these groups and others seen as "disabled." Where

previously there were few methods of education and little specific care, the 19th century developed several systems of addressing the needs of challenged individuals both in Europe and the U.S.

Helen's own education demonstrates what had developed—Boston had a school for the blind (Perkins, since 1832) and also one for the deaf; New York City also had a school for the deaf. Many states offered

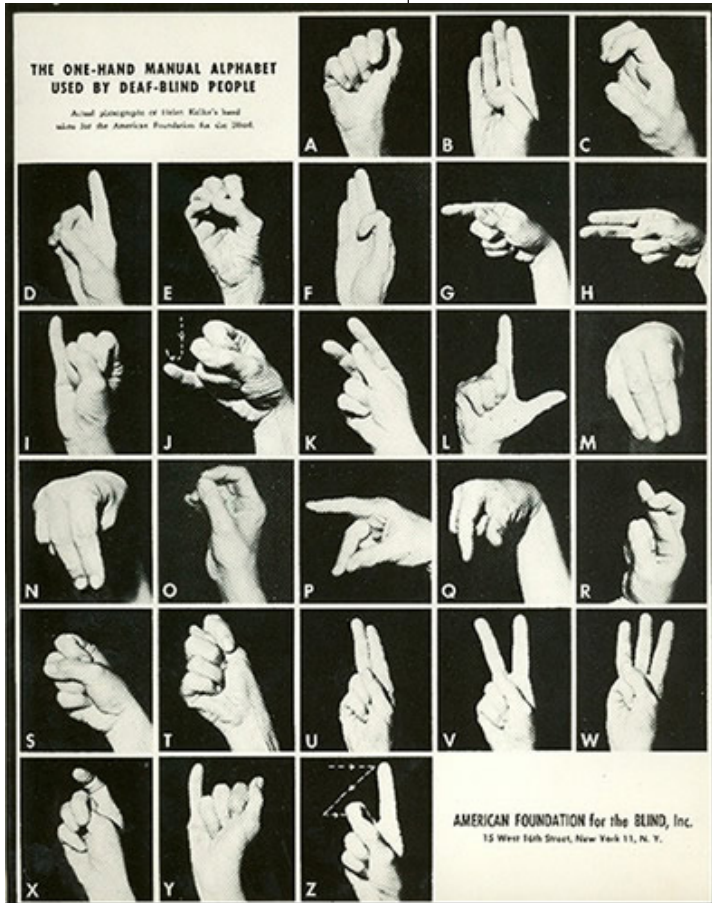
such individuals a chance to learn.

Annie Sullivan was an advocate for the challenged; she and Mr. Anagnos of Perkins Institute split ways on the subject when he wanted Keller and Sullivan to spend their lives at the Institute as Laura Bridgman had. But, as Helen Keller says, "Teacher believes in the blind not as a class apart but as human beings endowed with rights to education, recreation, and employment suited as nearly as possible to their tastes and abilities." Sullivan and Keller fought for those rights all their lives, spearheading national foundations for the blind and deaf and advocating for education and jobs.

...and in Alabama

In October of 1858 Joseph H. Johnson, inspired by trying to help a hearing-impaired brother, opened the Alabama School for the Deaf in Talledega, and in 1867, in response to a brother-in-law visually impaired in the Civil War, added the Alabama School for the Blind. In 1870 the state funded the schools and changed the name to the Alabama Institute for the Deaf, Dumb and Blind. In 1887 the school split into two institutes, and in 1892 the Alabama School for the Negro Deaf and Blind joined in a nearby facility. The curriculum was traditional and also vocational, and included a lively sports program (baseball, football, basketball). In 1955 the Helen Keller School was added to address the needs of those both deaf and blind. A technical facility expanded opportunities, and in 1968 the schools integrated. The Institute now also has 9 regional centers across the state.

Helen Keller later observed, "I cannot believe parents would keep their deaf or blind child at home to grow up in silence and darkness if they knew there was a good school in Talladega where they would be kindly and wisely treated."



The manual chart for the deaf, using Helen Keller's hand. Learn to spell "water"!



Laura Bridgman, a New Hampshire farm child who at 2 had scarlet fever and lost her sense of sight, hearing, smell, and most of her sense of taste. By the age of 7, like young Helen, she reacted to stimuli violently. No one in

the mid-1830s thought the deaf-blind could be reached, but Samuel Gridley Howe of the new Perkins Institute developed a way to teach her language, first by raised words on labels and then raised single letters until she realized how words express meaning. Because her farming family could or would not then offer the life support she needed, an endowment allowed her to live the rest of her life at Perkins Institute.

THE **MIRACLE
WORKER**
by William Gibson



*Helen Keller
as a young woman*

Worksheet for *The Miracle Worker* in Performance

1. • What are the family's goals for Helen when the action starts?
 - What are Annie Sullivan's goals for Helen when she arrives in Tuscumbia?
 - How do they negotiate any differences?
2. • What does Helen know? What does Helen want? How does she get it?
 - How do Helen's objectives change in the course of the action? Why?
3. Are there any tensions in the family not related to Helen? If so, what do they reveal?
4. • Annie Sullivan has two objectives—teaching obedience and teaching knowledge. Why is each important? Why and how are they different?
 - What order does she teach them in? Why?
5. What does the production's setting (the set and lighting and sound) give the play and how is it used to enhance the story?
6. What was the best story moment in the play for you and why? What was the best theatrical moment and why?



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