

Study Guide



Anne Sullivan

The Miracle Worker by William Gibson

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Biography: William Gibson (1914-2008)

Playwright William Gibson was born in New York City in 1914. He grew up in the Bronx, and was encouraged to read and write at an early age. Despite his abilities, Gibson did not do well in school. His interests were reading and writing, and he found other subjects such as science and math difficult and tedious. He struggled to keep up with his classmates throughout school.

Gibson attended community college in New York, continuing to struggle in science and math courses. After being expelled from the college for poor grades, Gibson decided to devote his life to writing. He supported himself by playing the piano and taking on various part-time jobs until he was finally published nearly twenty years later.

In addition to plays, Gibson has written an autobiography, poetry, fiction and scripts for film and television. His most popular and well-received play is *The Miracle Worker*, the story of deaf and blind Helen Keller and her tutor Anne Sullivan, for which he received a Tony Award for Best Play for the Broadway production in 1960.

Gibson's other works include: *Two for the Seesaw* (1958), *A Cry of Players* (1968), *The Butterfingers* (1975), *Golda's Balcony* (1977), *Shakespeare's Game* (1978), *Monday After the Miracle*, the sequel to *The Miracle Worker* (1983), as well as the musical version of Clifford Odets's *Golden Boy* (1964).

Biography: Anne Sullivan (1866-1936)

Anne Mansfield Sullivan Macy is best known as the strong-willed teacher of the blind and deaf Helen Keller. She was born on April 14, 1866, and at the age of five, became almost completely blind from trachoma, a disease of the eyes. Two years later, her mother died and her father abandoned her, and Anne was placed in the state institution, the Tewksbury orphanage. She and her brother Jimmie lived in the institution, and due to poor health conditions and lack of medical care, Jimmie eventually died of tuberculosis.

Anne was later admitted to the Perkins Institution for the Blind in 1880, and after several operations, her sight was partially restored. She graduated in 1886 as class valedictorian and was chosen a year later to teach Helen Keller. Although she had no experience as a teacher of the deaf-blind, she gratefully accepted the challenge. She was eventually able to tame the "wild" child and teach her to communicate, and Anne and Helen began a friendship that would last a lifetime.

In 1905, Anne married John Macy, an instructor and writer, while Helen was at Radcliffe College. The marriage was shaky, and by 1914, the two had officially separated. Anne and Helen worked closely after Helen's graduation, touring and lecturing for civil rights and equality, and as advocates for the American Foundation for the Blind. Anne Macy died in New York on October 20, 1936 at the age of seventy.

Biography: Helen Keller (1880-1968)

Helen Adams Keller was born a healthy baby girl on June 27, 1880 to parents Kate and Captain Arthur Keller of Tuscumbia, Alabama. But before her 2nd birthday, Helen contracted a serious illness, believed to be scarlet fever or meningitis, which made Helen extremely ill. While doctors believed Helen would not survive, she did, but lost her sight and hearing as a result of her illness.

Without support or education, the Kellers did the best they could to raise Helen, but she was a difficult child, known to throw violent temper tantrums. By the age of six, the Kellers considered putting Helen into an institution, but instead sought the services of the Perkins Institution and Massachusetts Asylum for the Blind to find a teacher for Helen. Anne Sullivan, a former student of the Institution was assigned to Helen. After several weeks of struggles and challenges, a connection was made between Helen and Anne, and Helen finally learned to communicate. The play, *The Miracle Worker*, documents that early teaching.

Helen learned at an unusually rapid pace, and it was not long before Anne had taught Helen to read and write using Braille. Helen eventually attended the Cambridge School for Young Ladies in 1896 and in 1900 entered Radcliffe College, becoming the first deaf-blind person to have ever enrolled at an institution of higher learning. In 1904, Helen graduated from Radcliffe.

She became a famous figure, writing and speaking of her experiences together with Anne Sullivan, who served as a confidante and an interpreter. Helen even wrote an autobiography entitled *The Story of My Life* in 1902.

Helen continued throughout her life to lecture and raise money for the deaf and blind, and publicly campaign for civil rights, human dignity, women's suffrage, and world peace. In 1924, she began to work for the *American Foundation for the Blind*, serving as a spokesperson and ambassador until 1968.

In 1964, Helen was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom and was inducted into the Women's Hall of Fame at the World's Fair in 1965. She died in her sleep on June 1, 1968.

Play Summary

Act One

Scene One: The doctor says Helen will live; Kate discovers Helen cannot see or hear.

Scene Two: Helen pins down Martha with scissors; the family discusses getting help for Helen; Helen pulls off Aunt Ev's buttons to make eyes for her doll; Helen knocks the baby out of the crib to put her doll in it.

Scene Three: Anagnos assigns Anne to Helen; the girls give Anne a going away present of dark glasses; Anne has a flashback about Jimmie.

Scene Four: Anne arrives at the Keller house; Anne begins a first lesson with Helen-"doll"; Helen locks Anne in her room and hides the key in her mouth; Anne watches Helen take the key out of her mouth and drop the key into the well.

Act Two

Scene One: Annie expresses her frustrations in a letter; Helen stabs Anne with a needle, and is rewarded by Kate.

Scene Two: At the breakfast table, Anne is appalled that Helen is allowed to grab food from anyone's plate. Anne refuses to give Helen her plate; a fight ensues; Anne asks to be left alone with Helen. Scene Three: Anne and Helen fight, but Anne is finally able to make Helen eat from her own plate and fold her napkin.

Scene Four: The Kellers find out the progress Helen has made, and Kate is impressed.

Scene Five: Annie has a flashback of Jimmie and Tewksbury; Keller wants to fire Annie, but changes his mind; Annie asks to move Helen to the Garden House; they “move” Helen—plan is for two weeks. Scene Six: Helen resists Anne at first, but then Helen reluctantly allows Anne to touch her in order to spell to her.

Act Three

Scene One: (Garden house) Anne continues to teach Helen that everything has a name; Annie expresses her frustrations in a letter.

Scene One: (Keller home) Kate is anxious about Helen's return home; Kate and James make a connection.

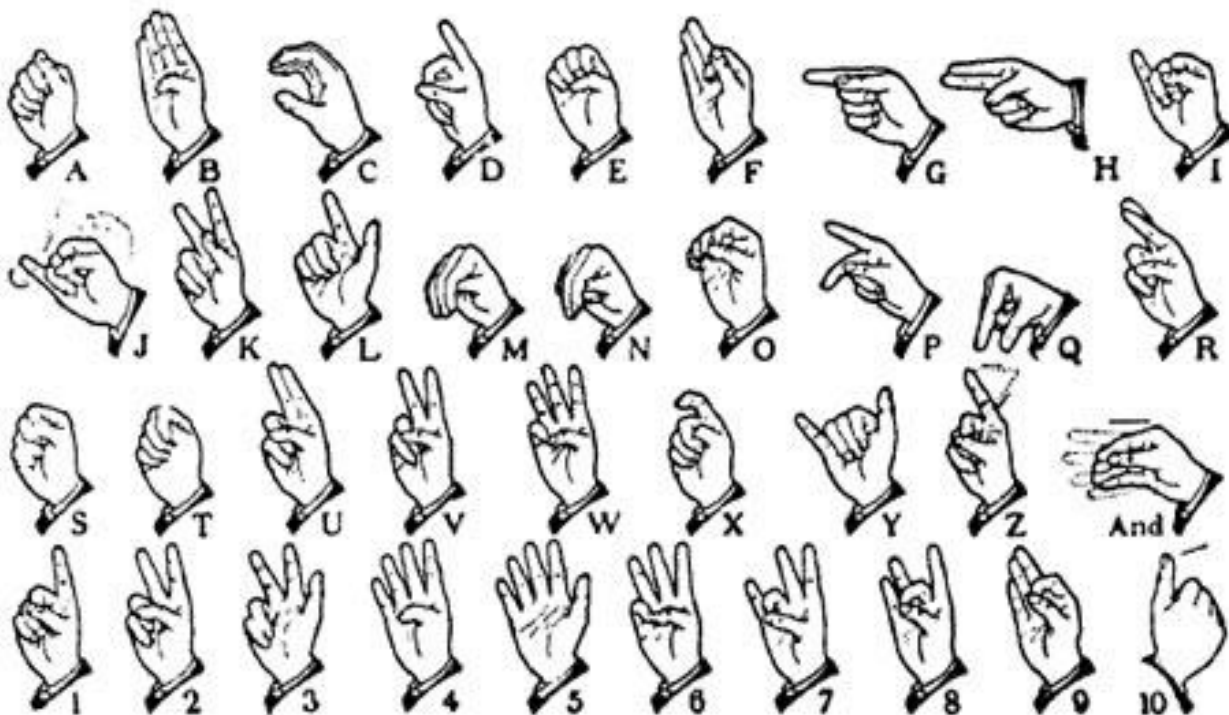
Scene Two: Kate arrives at the garden house; Kate watches Helen crocheting, sees her calmness; Anne begs for another week but is denied.

Scene Three: Anne tries to get in every last bit of teaching time; Keller recognizes her work, pays her for her first month.

Scene Four: The Keller family attempts to eat a homecoming dinner on behalf of Helen; Helen “tests” Anne and her family, dropping her napkin, throwing a fit, destroying the table, eating with her hands; the family wants to indulge Helen to keep the peace, but Anne won't allow it; James stands up to his father for the first time.

Scene Five: Anne drags Helen to the water pump to fill the water pitcher that she knocked over in the last scene; Anne spells “water” while pumping the water; finally Helen understands and makes the connection that the spelling in her hand means something; she excitedly runs around touching objects and she and Anne spell them to each other—the miracle happened.

The Manual Alphabet



Reading Questions:

Act I

1. What are the different attitudes of the family members towards Helen:

Mother Kate Keller _____

Father Captain Keller _____

Half-brother James _____

Aunt Ev _____

2. Why do the Kellers hire Anne Sullivan?

3. Where was Annie before coming to the Kellers in Alabama?

4. Who is Dr. Anagnos and what role does he play in Annie's life?

5. Analyze the flashback on pp. 17-18.

When did the action take place?

Where did it take place?

What does it tell us about Annie that she has flashbacks such as this?

6. What does the family use to try to control Helen?

7. What are Mrs. Keller's concerns about Annie when they first meet?

How does Annie deal with these concerns? What does she her three "advantages" are? (p. 24)

Do you think these really are advantages? Explain.

8. Describe the method Annie is using to try to teach language to Helen. (pp. 29-30)

9. What are the first things Helen does to get an advantage over Annie during their first hours together?

10. On p. 34, Annie has another flashback. What is it about?

The doctor in the flashback tells Annie, "Little girl, I must tell you your brother will be going on a—"
Complete his sentence. What is he trying to tell her about Jimmie?

Act II

1. What is Annie doing as Act II opens?

What does she her "greatest problem" is? (p. 41)

2. What does Mrs. Keller do when Helen stabs Annie, and why does her action anger Annie?

3. What does Annie say when Kate Keller refers to Helen as "impaired"? (p. 44)

4. What does Kate want to learn?

5. When Annie gets back to her letter, what does she say is “the gateway through which knowledge enters the mind of the child”? (p. 45)

Compare this statement in the play with the passage below from a recent biography of Annie Sullivan.

...[O]ver and over [Annie] referred to the “two essential things” she sought to teach Helen: “obedience and love.” Sullivan quickly surmised that “it was useless to try to teach her language or anything else until she learned to obey me.” She came to believe that “obedience is a gateway through which knowledge, yes, and the love, too, enter the mind of the child.”

– From *Beyond the Miracle Worker* by Kim E. Nielsen

How does the play revise historical reality somewhat?

6. Explain what problem occurs at the breakfast table, and how Annie deals with it.

7. What is the situation between James and his father, Captain Keller?

8. Upon finally emerging from the dining room on p. 58, what three things does Annie say she he managed to get Helen to do?

9. To what does the Perkins Report compare a blind-deaf-mute person like Helen? (p. 60)

10. Carefully read the flashback on pp. 59-62.

Where does it take place?

What people are speaking?

What conflict does the flashback highlight, concerning Annie's desires for her future and her brother Jimmie?

Why does Annie feel guilty when she remembers her brother?

Do you think her feeling is justified? Explain.

11. What does Mrs. Keller say on p. 66 that indicates Helen's extraordinary intelligence?

12. What does Annie say is Helen's "worst handicap"?

How does she propose to overcome it?

During this discussion, what does Annie finally tell the Kellers about? (pp. 68-69)

What does she describe about the Almshouse?

13. On p. 71, what one goal does Annie say she aims to accomplish in the two weeks?

14. What does James say Annie should have for Helen? (p. 73)

What is Annie's reply? What does she mean by this?

15. Why is James jealous of Annie?

16. What emotion in Helen does Annie play on to get her to let Annie touch her again?

Act III

3. What has the experience of Helen's absence been like for the Kellers?

4. What advice does Kate give James on p. 86?

How does this help explain James' jealousy of Annie?

5. Why does Annie have such trouble with spelling?

6. In what way was the Garden House experience successful? Did Annie accomplish her one goal?

2. In what ways has Annie "won the battle but lost the war" by page 94? That is, what larger lesson has she failed to teach Helen?

3. Another flashback occurs on p. 97. Whom are two the conversations here between?

What does Annie say about God?

What does she mean by this?

4. As soon as the family is back in the dining room, what does Helen start to do?

5. What orders does Annie give to the Kellers at the bottom of p. 106?

Who stands up for Annie's right to do what she's doing?

6. What finally happens out at the pump?

7. In what ways do each of the following character change during the course of the play?

Captain Keller _____

James Keller _____

Kate Keller _____

Helen Keller _____

Annie Sullivan _____

October 21, 1936

OBITUARY

Mrs. Macy Is Dead; Aided Miss Keller

BY THE NEW YORK TIMES

Mrs. Anne Mansfield Sullivan Macy, who for nearly fifty years was the kindly, patient and brilliant teacher of Miss Helen Keller, noted blind and deaf woman, died yesterday at their home, 71-11 Seminole Avenue, Forest Hills, Queens. She had been suffering from a heart ailment, which became acute early this Summer. Mrs. Macy was 70 years old.

Mrs. Macy taught Miss Keller to read, speak and know the world about her by use of her fingertips. Their lifelong devotion to each other was internationally famous and one was seldom seen or heard of without the other. Blindness, which had shadowed the child Anne Sullivan's life and which she had conquered before she met Miss Keller, had returned to darken her last days, and Miss Keller had to become the teacher and Mrs. Macy the pupil.

Miss Keller yesterday paid this tribute: "Teacher is free at least from pain and blindness. I pray for strength to endure the silent dark until she smiles upon me again."

Miss Polly Thompson, Miss Keller's secretary, said yesterday that Miss Keller was "bearing up magnificently" under her loss. During the last week Miss Keller was almost constantly at Mrs. Macy's side. Mrs. Macy was in a coma from Thursday until she died. On Wednesday she said: "Oh, Helen and Polly, my children, I pray God will unite us in His love."

Mrs. Macy, so long the link to light for Miss Keller, lost the sight of her own right eye in 1929, due partly to a cataract, for which an operation was performed. In May, 1935, a cataract operation was done on her left eye, but thereafter she was able to distinguish only light and color with it. She could no longer read or guide her beloved Miss Keller, who, despite her own handicaps, devoted herself to her friend.

Pupil Guides Teacher in Braille

As early as 1933 Miss Keller had commenced to teach Mrs. Macy to read Braille. But the Braille system had changed since Mrs. Macy taught it to Miss Keller and the teacher found it difficult.

When it became known that year that Miss Keller, who had been led out of the black silence in which she had existed since childhood by the ingenuity, perseverance and patience of her teacher, was in turn preparing her teacher to "see"

with her fingers, THE NEW YORK TIMES, in an editorial, said:

"The 'blind leading the blind' will henceforth have a new meaning wherever the story of Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller is known. They who have been exiled from the light have been able to demonstrate the power of the mind to overcome limitation."

Mrs. Macy was 21 years old when she met Helen Keller. Born in Feeding Hills, near Springfield, Mass., on April 14, 1866, the daughter of Irish immigrants, John and Mary Mansfield Sullivan, Mrs. Macy suffered the loss of her mother when a young child. For a year or two she was supported by poor relatives, but at the age of 10 she was sent to the State Infirmiry, Tewksbury, Mass.

She was already partially blind and at the infirmiry two eye operations were performed, but her sight did not improve. She was led to believe that Frank B. Sanborn, chairman of the State Board of Charities, who sometimes visited the infirmiry, might be able to aid her. She pleaded with him and he arranged for her entry into the Perkins Institution for the Blind in Boston, where lived Laura Bridgman, blind and deaf, who had been trained there.

Underwent Two Eye Operations

Mrs. Macy entered the Perkins Institution in 1880, made there a brilliant scholastic record and learned to study with her fingers, and later, after two operations had restored her sight, to use her eyes. She learned the manual, or finger, alphabet, so as to be able to talk to Laura Bridgman. In 1886 she was graduated as valedictorian of her class.

Not long after her graduation Helen Keller's father wrote to the institution asking for help for her. Miss Sullivan was chosen to be her teacher and, after familiarizing herself with the details of her new work, went to Helen's home in Tuscumbia, Ala.

The two who were to mean so much to each other until Mrs. Macy's death yesterday met first on March 3, 1887, three months before Helen was 7 years old. Miss Keller said later that it was "the most important day I remember in all my life."

Working carefully, so as to bring Helen under some sort of discipline without breaking her spirit, Mrs. Macy began spelling words into her hand. With no understanding of what they meant, Helen began repeating them.

The teacher persisted, spelling the word doll when she gave her a doll, bread when she gave her bread, candy when she gave her candy. In less than a month Helen realized that everything had a name and that she had a way, the finger alphabet, of calling the names.

Teaching Along New Paths

One day Mrs. Macy tried to teach Helen the difference between a cup and the water in the cup. She took her to a pump, pumped water over one hand and spelled water into the other hand. Helen at last understood. She pointed to Miss Sullivan, who spelled teacher, and "teacher" she was to the close.

Mrs. Macy educated Helen, using always the finger spelling, but treating her like any other child. After preliminary lessons in speaking, Helen learned from Mrs. Macy to converse and even speak from a platform.

Teacher and pupil remained for a time at the Perkins Institution. Then, in 1894, Helen was enrolled in the Wright-Humason Oral School for the Deaf in New York. Later Miss Sullivan took her to a school in Cambridge to prepare her for Radcliffe College and finally Helen passed triumphantly her entrance examinations, entered Radcliffe and in 1904 was graduated cum laude.

Throughout the college course Mrs. Macy was with Helen, spelling into her hands the words of the textbooks and the books of required reading. Miss Keller's career thereafter brought her more and more into the public eye. She became famous as an author, she raised huge sums for the blind, she traveled, she was everywhere acclaimed, and Mrs. Macy went everywhere with her.

"My own life," Mrs. Macy said once, "is so interwoven with my Helen's life that I can't separate myself from her."

Honored by Foreign Lands

When Mrs. Macy's sixty-seventh birthday was celebrated Miss Keller proposed a toast:

"Here's to my teacher, whose birthday was the Easter morning of my life."

In 1931 Mrs. Macy received the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters from Temple University and the Order of St. Sava from the King of Yugoslavia.

In 1932 she became an honorary fellow of the Educational Institute of Scotland. Mrs. Macy stayed in seclusion for several months in 1933 in Scotland while Miss Keller nursed her. Mrs. Macy's blindness grew more pronounced and on her return from Scotland she said:

"Helen is and always has been thoroughly well behaved in her blindness as well as her deafness, but I'm making a futile fight of it, like a bucking bronco. It's not the big things in life that one misses through loss of sight, but such little things as being able to read. And I have no patience, like Helen, for the Braille system, because I can't read fast enough."

Early this month the Roosevelt Memorial Association announced that Roosevelt medals "for a cooperative achievement of heroic character and far-reaching significance" would be presented to Miss Keller and Mrs. Macy. In a telegram of sympathy to Miss Keller yesterday Hermann Hagedorn, executive director of the association, said that presentation to Miss Keller would be postponed from Oct. 27 to next year.

Mrs. Macy was married to John Albert Macy, author and critic, in 1905. He died in 1932. There are no immediate survivors.

A funeral service will be conducted at 2 P. M. tomorrow at the Park Avenue Presbyterian Church, 1,010 Park Avenue, by the Rev. Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick and the Rev. Edmund M. Wylie, the pastor.

After the service, cremation will take place, in accord with Mrs. Macy's wish, at the Fresh Pond Crematory, Queens.

The honorary pallbearers will be M. C. Migel, president of the American Foundation for the Blind, which Miss Keller and Mrs. Macy greatly aided; Robert Irwin, executive director of the foundation; Harvey D. Gibson, Russell Doubleday, Dr. Conrad Berens, Dr. Philip S. Smith, Dr. William F. Saybolt, Dr. John H. Finley, Louis Bamberger, the Rev. Dr. Edward E. Allen, director emeritus of the Perkins Institution; Dr. William Allan Neilson, president of Smith College, and William Ziegler Jr.