# The Miracle Worker

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM GIBSON

William Gibson grew up in New York City and later attended City College of New York, where he was active in theater. In the 1940s, Gibson wrote a handful of novels, plays, and poetry collections, without much success. To support himself, he was forced to work in a psychiatric clinic, and his time at the clinic inspired his novel *The Cobweb* (1951). His big break came in 1958 when his play *Two for the Seesaw* was accepted for production on Broadway. The play was a huge success, starring the legendary actor Henry Fonda, as well as the soon-to-be famous Anne Bancroft. Gibson followed his Broadway debut with the even more successful *The Miracle Worker* (1959). Both plays were later adapted into successful films. Gibson never wrote another play that matched the success of his first two Broadway productions, but he remained a prolific writer until his death in 2008. He married Margaret Brenman-Gibson, a world-famous psychotherapist whose influence can be detected in Gibson's plays, which often have overt psychological themes.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the 1880s, when Gibson's play is set, the United States was still reeling from the impact of the Civil War, during which the Northern states battled with the Southern, slaveholding states. Following the Civil War, blacks in the South had earned the right to vote and own property, but were still treated as second-class citizens in every way—a fact that is evident throughout the play (the Kellers are a wealthy, aristocratic family and have multiple black servants). The fact that Annie Sullivan hails from Boston is also very important, since it influences the Keller family's perception of her as arrogant, "rough," and disrespectful of their customs. It's also worth noting that Helen Keller went on to become a notable supporter of the Socialist Party of America. She campaigned for union rights and women's suffrage, and was widely criticized for doing so (including by some of the same people who lauded her as a hero in childhood). One editor even argued that Keller had been seduced by socialism because of "the manifest limitations of her development." To this day, few realize how radical Helen Keller was as an adult—for most people, Keller's historical importance ends the second she learns how to talk. For a good discussion of Keller's life and why it is so often glossed over in history classes, check out the first chapter of James W. Loewen's book *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (1995).

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*The Miracle Worker* is one of many books and plays that deal with a young character coming to terms with a disability. Other (more recent) examples of this subgenre include *Colin Fischer* (2012) by Zach Stentz and Ashley Edward Miller, *Jerk, California* (2008) by Jonathan Friesen, and *Blind* (2014) by Rachel DeWoskin. Gibson's play is also a good example of a fictional work about the relationship between a student and an inspiring teacher, with other notable examples including *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) by Lucy Maud Montgomery, *Awakenings* (1973) by Oliver Sacks (in which Sacks, much like Annie Sullivan, learns valuable life lessons by working closely with patients with disabilities), and *Wonder Boys* (1995) by Michael Chabon. *The Miracle Worker* also had a huge influence on Hollywood, as "inspirational mentor" movies like *Good Will Hunting*, *Dead Poets Society*, and *Finding Forrester* owe a lot to a dramatic formula that Gibson arguably helped popularize.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Miracle Worker
- **When Written:** 1957-1959
- **Where Written:** New York City and Topeka, Kansas
- **When Published:** Originally written in 1957 as a teleplay for *Playhouse 90*, later rewritten as a three-act Broadway play, premiered October 19, 1959
- **Literary Period:** Modern theater
- **Genre:** Historical drama
- **Setting:** Tuscumbia, Alabama, 1880s
- **Climax:** Annie teaches Helen how to communicate via sign language
- **Antagonist:** Pity, prejudice, and pessimism could be considered the abstract antagonists of the play

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Power couple.** William Gibson's wife, the psychotherapist Margaret Brenman-Gibson, was probably even more famous in her discipline than Gibson was in his. A pioneering Freudian psychoanalyst, she was one of the first women to be made a full professor at Harvard University. Until the late 1950s, she supported her husband with her income from teaching and practicing psychoanalysis.

**Next stop, Hollywood.** Gibson's plays have been adapted into some acclaimed films. *The Miracle Worker* was made into a film in 1962, and it won two Oscars for its two female leads, Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke. Bancroft went on to become one of Hollywood's leading stars after this film (playing Mrs. Robinson in *The Graduate*, for example). Arthur Penn, the film's director,

went on to direct the New Hollywood classic *Bonnie and Clyde*. Gibson's first Broadway play, *Two for the Seesaw*, was also made into a successful film in 1962, starring Robert Mitchum and Shirley MacLaine. *The Miracle Worker* has also been adapted for TV twice, most recently in 2000.

## PLOT SUMMARY

In Alabama in the 1880s, the wealthy Keller family has just given birth to a baby girl, Helen Keller. Captain Arthur Keller and his second wife, Kate Keller, summon a doctor to treat Helen for a fever. Soon after, they learn that Helen has lost her ability to see or hear.

Five years pass, and Helen is now a little girl. She can't communicate with anyone, and so she spends her days horsing around, misbehaving, and sometimes attacking other children. Her family does very little to change her behavior—in fact, Kate sometimes rewards Helen with **candy** even when she's been bad. Helen's half-brother, James Keller (from Arthur's first marriage) is cynical about Helen's chances of ever learning how to read or write, and suggests that Arthur send Helen to an asylum.

Even though the Kellers have summoned dozens of doctors to teach Helen, Kate remains cautiously optimistic. She reaches out to a young woman named Annie Sullivan. Annie Sullivan, the audience learns, grew up in Massachusetts. She and her beloved brother, James Sullivan, had a rough early life, and spent years in an almshouse. When Annie was still young, James died, and Annie seems to blame herself for the tragedy. She believes that she broke her promise to her brother—to take care of him always—and vows never to break another promise to a child.

Annie was virtually **blind** as a child, and she later attended the Perkins Institute for the Blind. There she underwent an operation to regain her sight. Her teacher at Perkins, Anagnos, taught her a great deal, and inspired her to become a teacher, too. Although Annie has regained her sight, she often wears **smoked glasses** in order to protect her sensitive eyes from bright lights.

Annie arrives at the Keller household, where she meets Helen. To the Kellers' surprise, Annie uses a more hands-on, aggressive approach than any of her predecessors, getting down on the floor to interact with Helen and at times punishing Helen harshly for misbehaving. Most importantly, Annie begins by teaching Helen the sign language for things like "dog," "doll," and "cake." It's important for Helen to memorize these signs, Annie explains to a skeptical James, so that in the future she can understand that these signs symbolize real things. Helen is initially reluctant to cooperate with Annie. She hits Annie and, at one point, locks Annie in her room and hides the **key**. Annie is frustrated, but refuses to leave.

As the days go on, Annie succeeds in getting Helen to cooperate with her, but she realizes that she'll never get Helen to learn sign language unless she can exercise total control over her pupil, independent of Arthur and Kate. Arthur is skeptical of Annie's teaching methods, and at one point contemplates sending her back to Massachusetts. With Kate's encouragement, however, he agrees to let Annie stay. Annie will have two weeks, alone in the garden house outside the Keller home, to teach Helen. Meanwhile, James continues to quarrel with his father. At one point, he accuses Arthur of "forgetting everything" after he married Kate.

Alone in the garden house, Annie makes gradual progress in teaching Helen how to be polite and orderly. She continues to teach Helen sign language, but recognizes that Helen still doesn't understand what signs *are*. Meanwhile, Kate encourages James to "stand up to the world" rather than live in constant frustration with his father. Kate and James agree to be friends.

Two weeks go by, and Arthur and Kate prepare to move Helen back to their house. Back in the house, Helen immediately begins to regress, misbehaving when she realizes that nobody is going to punish her anymore. At supper, Helen spills a pitcher of **water**, and Annie angrily drags Helen out of the room. Arthur is about to prevent Annie from doing so, but James stands up to his father, asking him, "Has it never occurred to you that on one occasion you might be consummately wrong?"

Outside, Annie guides Helen's hand over water from a water pump, and then makes the sign for water on Helen's hand. To Annie's amazement, Helen understands what Annie is doing, and even says, "wah wah." Overjoyed, Annie cries, "She knows!" and shows Helen the signs for various other things, including "mother" and "teacher." When Helen communicates with Kate for the first time, Helen spells out the word "teacher," and Kate is both overjoyed and saddened. The play ends with Annie embracing Helen and telling her, in sign language, "I love Helen forever and ever."

## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Annie Sullivan** – Annie Sullivan is the "miracle worker" of the play's title, and the play's protagonist. A Massachusetts "Yankee," as several of the Kellers like to call her, Annie grew up blind in a squalid almshouse with her younger brother, James Sullivan. James (or "Jimmie") died at the almshouse, and Annie appears to feel personally responsible for the death of her beloved brother. Later, Annie attended the Perkins Institute for the **Blind**, where she learned how to read and write, and eventually received surgery to help her regain her sight. She seems to be attracted to teaching, not just because she's benefitted from education personally but because she

continues to feel guilty for James's death. In a way, taking care of children is her way of atoning for having "abandoned" James as a child. Annie tries to teach Helen Keller how to communicate by introducing her to sign language. Annie is shown to be a highly capable teacher—not so much because she's a genius, but because she's persistent and has a personal stake in helping her pupils succeed. In the end, Annie succeeds in teaching Helen the concept of meaning—that is, the relationship between words in sign language and the things they represent. In doing so, it's implied, Annie not only triumphs where many other doctors have failed—she also comes to terms with her own traumatic past.

**Helen Keller** – Helen Keller is one of the two main characters of *The Miracle Worker*. In real life, she was one of the most famous Americans of her time: despite being blind and deaf, she learned how to communicate, and later became a famous author and political activist. In Gibson's play, however, Helen is a young child, unable to communicate with anyone until the very end of the play. Helen is wild and unruly: because nobody has ever been able to communicate with her, she doesn't know how to behave, and often doesn't even seem to know that she *is* misbehaving. Helen is clearly a smart young child: she's endlessly inquisitive about the world, as evidenced by the fact that she's always moving around the room, trying to learn about new objects and people in her environment. And yet, Helen struggles to learn—not just because she's deaf and blind but also because her family spoils her, giving her no real incentive to change her behavior. With the help of her teacher, Annie Sullivan, Helen learns how to use sign language to talk and learn. Although she utters only one word, "wah wah" (i.e., **water**), Helen's energy and animal-like physicality give readers a window into her personality: she's clearly a clever, curious child, who hungers to learn everything there is to know about the world.

**Kate Keller** – Kate Keller is the mother of Helen Keller and the second, considerably younger wife of Captain Arthur Keller. A kind and loving woman, Kate is a loyal mother to Helen, trying again and again to teach her to talk and communicate. She convinces her husband to hire some of the finest doctors in the country and she's instrumental in reaching out to Annie Sullivan, the teacher who ultimately teaches Helen to use sign language. And yet there is something constraining and stifling about Kate's relationship with her daughter. She loves Helen, but she also babies Helen excessively, to the point where Helen has no incentive to learn to communicate: Kate gives Helen **candy** and attention no matter what she does. At the end of the play, it is Annie, not Kate, who embraces Helen, perhaps signaling that while Kate is Helen's loving mother, it is Annie who has become the true maternal presence in Helen's life.

**Captain Arthur Keller** – Captain Arthur Keller is the gruff, middle-aged patriarch of the Keller family. He's frequently confused about what's going on, and seems much less sensitive to the needs of the rest of his family than Kate Keller, his wife. In many ways, Arthur Keller seems to be modeled off the archetypal father figure: stubborn, proud, and stoic. He's stern but well-meaning, though he doesn't take an active role in caring for his kids, and is highly skeptical of Annie Sullivan's teaching methods. Additionally, Arthur is shown to be alienated from his son, James Keller: he expresses disappointment in his son and doesn't understand why James has such a hard time obeying his orders. James and Arthur seem not to know how to talk to one another about their feelings. By the play's end, however, Arthur seems to have overcome his prejudices against Annie the "Yankee," as he allows her to employ her strict methods. He also shows new respect for James, suggesting that he'll do a better job of communicating with his son from now on.

**James Keller** – James Keller is the adult son of Arthur Keller from his first marriage. Helen Keller is James's half-sister, and Kate Keller is his stepmother. For most of the play, James is a laconic, wisecracking cynic. He thinks there's no point in trying to teach Helen how to write, and he's not shy about telling other people his opinion—including Annie Sullivan herself. Although James makes a show of being cool and disinterested, he's actually very concerned with his relationship with his father, and seems to resent him for remarrying the much younger Kate Keller, viewing it as an insult to the memory of his mother. Over the course of the play, Annie's lessons in communication inspire James to stand up to his father and even develop a friendship with Kate, suggesting that the play's events catalyze something of a coming of age for James himself.

**James Sullivan / "Jimmie"** – James Sullivan, Annie Sullivan's little brother, is never seen onstage, but his voice is an important presence in the play. James and Annie grew up in extreme poverty, and eventually were taken to live in a state almshouse. Around this time, James (who could barely walk) fell seriously ill and died. This caused Annie tremendous guilt, since she had promised that she would always take care of her brother. Jimmie has only a few lines in the play, but he's an important character: Annie's narrative "arc" begins with her guilt over Jimmie's death and ends with her redeeming herself by "saving" Helen Keller from her isolation.

**Aunt Ev** – Aunt Ev is the sister of Captain Arthur Keller. A minor character in the play, she is nonetheless a staple character around the Keller household, taking care of Helen or making her **dolls**. Ev is the most proudly, self-consciously "Southern" character in the play: she objects to Annie Sullivan's presence in the house on the grounds that she's an arrogant Yankee. Ev is also skeptical of Annie's aggressive teaching methods, arguing that Helen is "just a child" and should not be held accountable for her misbehavior.

**Anagnos** – Anagnos is the director of the Perkins Institute for the Blind. In the play, Anagnos is Annie Sullivan's teacher. He has known her since she was a child, and worked closely with

her to teach her how to read and write. He's also instrumental in raising the funds to pay for the operations she undergoes, which allow her to see clearly for the first time in her life.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Doctor** – The doctor who treats Helen Keller's fever as an infant, shortly before it is discovered that Helen has lost her sight and hearing.

**Dr. Howe** – A prominent doctor who tries and fails to teach Helen Keller prior to Annie's arrival.

**Viney** – A black servant who works for the Keller family.

**Martha** – A young black child—likely belonging to one of the Keller family's servants—who spends time around the Keller household.

**Mildred** – Baby child of Captain Arthur Keller and Kate Keller.

**Percy** A black boy who is just a bit older than **Helen**. Helen likes him, and when he's older he helps **Annie Sullivan** to take care of and teach Helen in the garden house.

# THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

## COMMUNICATION

The central theme of *The Miracle Worker* is communication. William Gibson's play is based on the true story of Annie Sullivan, a young woman from Massachusetts who in the 1880s succeeded in teaching Helen Keller, a young deaf-**blind** girl from Alabama, how to communicate through sign language. Thanks to Sullivan, Keller went on to become the first deaf-blind person to earn a B.A. degree, and later became a prominent author and political activist. By dramatizing the relationship between the young Helen and Annie—and between Annie and the other members of the Keller family—Gibson explores the ways in which people communicate (and fail to communicate), and shows how people can experience a sudden, almost miraculous emotional connection through the "magic" of communication.

*The Miracle Worker* shows that the ability to communicate with others is foundational to nearly every aspect of a person's life. Annie teaches Helen how to use sign language to express her feelings, ask questions, learn about the external world, and do all the things that most people take for granted. Until Helen learns to use the tools of communication that Annie is teaching her, she lives in near complete isolation due to her inability to see or hear. Annie, who was herself blind for much of her life but can now see, teaches Helen using the techniques she learned as a student at the Perkins Institute for the Blind. She spends hours showing Helen how to make letters with her fingers. Each finger-combination represents a different letter, and in this way Helen can combine different letters to make full words. However, Helen doesn't know what a word is, so she doesn't understand that things have names. She understands that the external world exists because she can feel, taste, and smell it, and she has no problem learning the different finger-combinations Annie shows her, but she doesn't understand the *connection* between a word in sign language and the object it is mean to represent in the external world. She doesn't understand that the finger-combinations for "D-O-G" are meant to correspond to an actual, living animal, much less an entire category of animals. For Helen, then, there is a "gap" between sign language and the external world—between "D-O-G" and a real, live dog. Because of this gap, Helen lacks the ability to communicate until the very end of the play.

Throughout the play, Gibson parallels Annie's struggle to teach Helen how to communicate with another kind of "gap": the *emotional* gap between Arthur Keller, the gruff patriarch of the Keller family, and James Keller, his adult son. Arthur and James have no trouble reading, writing, or speaking, and yet in many ways they're as powerless to communicate with each other as Helen and Annie. James resents his father for remarrying a younger woman, Kate Keller, so soon after his mother's death. As a result, James finds it hard to "be his own man" in the presence of his intimidating father, but he struggles to communicate this to his father directly. Even when James and Arthur do talk to each other, it's as if they're not really communicating at all. James uses language as a shield, hiding behind jokes and snide remarks, and Arthur remains oblivious to his son's intense feelings of resentment. James remains unable to express his feelings to Arthur until the very end of the play.

The play offers two variations on the theme of communication. It deals with Helen's struggle to learn to use language to name things in the external world, but it also explores the characters' struggles to give expression to their inner worlds and experiences. In the play's climactic scene, the two main narrative strands (Helen's relationship with Annie and James's relationship with Arthur) come together to make the same strong point about the power of communication. James summons the courage to stand up to his father by telling him to allow Annie to use unconventional teaching methods with Helen. In the process of expressing his own thoughts and opinions, James shows that he won't allow himself to be bossed around any longer. Furthermore, James's actions allow Annie to achieve a breakthrough with Helen, after which Helen finally grasps the connection between words and their meanings. In this way, "finding the right words" is shown to be as challenging

a task for a deaf-blind child as it is for a grown man. And yet, with enough courage and determination, people can use words to bridge seemingly unbridgeable distances and connect with other people. In this way, communication is shown not just to be a practical means through which Helen learns how to function in the world—it is also shown to be the root of love and self-respect.

## LEARNING AND TEACHING

When Annie Sullivan meets Helen Keller for the first time, they don't get along. Helen behaves wildly and shows no respect for Annie, since no one has been able to teach her how to behave herself. By the end of the play, however, Helen has learned how to treat Annie with respect and, furthermore, to use language as a tool for educating herself about the world at large. Helen had teachers before Annie, but none of them was able to "get through" to her in the way that Annie can. In short, *The Miracle Worker* isn't just a play about words and communication—it's about the twin processes of learning and teaching.

Gibson suggests that part of the reason why Annie succeeds with Helen where other teachers have failed is that Annie's own experience with **blindness** makes her able to identify with Helen's condition in a way that Helen's previous teachers could not. Annie spent much of her early life without the ability to see, but she regained her sight as an adult thanks to several special operations. Therefore, Annie remembers what it's like to feel utterly alone in the world, and to feel trapped in her own mind. As a child, she and her beloved brother, Jimmie, were forced to live in a harsh, derelict almshouse (i.e., a shelter for the poor). Later, Jimmie dies, leaving Annie to fend for herself. Annie's life experiences allow her to understand Helen in a way that nobody, including her parents and teachers, ever has. She sees Helen as a version of herself: a frightened and confused prisoner, "trapped" in her own mind in much the same way that Annie was trapped in the almshouse. Annie understands that she must see the world from Helen's point of view in order to reach her. When she meets Helen, Annie is able to do this because of her literal experience with blindness as well as her emotional experiences with fear, confusion, and isolation.

Because Annie identifies with Helen and her condition, she develops genuine compassion for Helen to a degree that none of Helen's previous teachers did, and this is ultimately what makes it possible for Helen to learn from Annie. Annie sees Helen as a person, not as a problem in need of solving, and for this reason she cares enough not to give up. While other teachers quit after a few fruitless days with Helen, Annie sees it as her personal responsibility to help Helen by teaching her how to communicate. In the end, Annie doesn't succeed in teaching Helen because she has a brilliant new method—rather, she succeeds because she's incredibly persistent, spending long hours spelling out the same word for Helen, over and over again. After two challenging weeks, Annie's hard work finally pays off, and Helen grasps the connection between **water** and the sequence of finger-combinations that represents water.

The best teacher, Gibson ultimately suggests, isn't necessarily the smartest person in the room or the person with the most authority. Rather, a great teacher has the compassion and empathy to understand her students. She knows how to tailor her lessons to the students' needs. Annie succeeds where dozens of other professionals have failed because she sees what nobody else does: that Helen is a bright child who's deeply curious about the world. By the same token, the best student isn't necessarily the smartest. Rather, good students need to learn to respect their teachers, which is easier to do when their teachers treat them as equals. Helen masters sign language because she comes to trust and cooperate with Annie instead of fighting her, as she did with Annie's predecessors. Ultimately, the play sees teaching and learning as "twin arts," with the teacher and the student engaging in a fruitful partnership.

## PITY VS. TOUGH LOVE

Throughout the play, Gibson contrasts the methods Annie Sullivan uses to teach Helen Keller with the methods that Helen's own parents use. Helen's parents' approach can be summed up in one word: pity. Where Annie is rigorous in her efforts to educate Helen, Helen's parents, Arthur Keller and Kate Keller, choose to baby her, giving her **candy** to pacify her and refusing to punish her when she misbehaves. While Arthur and Kate's methods might seem kind, the play shows how their pity for Helen is counterproductive, and winds up standing in the way of her learning how to communicate.

The fundamental problem with pitying people, the play suggests, is that it deprives people of dignity or respect and assumes that they can't learn or change—which in turn becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. When Annie arrives at the Kellers' house she immediately grasps why nobody else has managed to teach Helen anything: Arthur and Kate feel helpless to change Helen, so they let her do whatever she wants. Because Helen's parents spoil her terribly, Helen believes it's okay for her to be wild, rude, and destructive. There are never any consequences for her actions, and therefore she never has any incentive to change her behavior. Indeed, Arthur and Kate spoil Helen *because* they're afraid Helen will never change. Even though they keep hiring teachers for Helen, they're afraid that none of these teachers will ever succeed. And so they conclude that they might as well keep feeding their child candy. As Helen sees it, Arthur and Kate have allowed pity to overwhelm their duties as parents. Because they feel so badly for their child, they don't have the heart to punish her. In this way, the Kellers' pity is one of the main things preventing Helen from making any progress: they

pity Helen because they're afraid she'll never get any better, and as a result she never does.

The destructive power of pity becomes clearer in the play's third act, when Annie takes Helen to stay with her in the garden house outside the Keller's home. Alone with Helen, Annie is able to exercise stricter controls over her pupil. She doesn't give Helen rewards unless she has earned them, and when Helen misbehaves, she takes away Helen's food until Helen changes her ways. Soon enough, Helen has learned how to eat with a fork and a napkin. In two weeks, Annie accomplishes more for Helen than Helen's parents have in years, and the reason for this is clear: Helen's parents pity Helen and assume she will never learn, while Annie respects Helen and has faith that she *can* learn.

Annie's intense, often severe style of teaching Helen—which might be classified simply as tough love—is the exact opposite of Arthur and Kate's approach. Superficially, Annie's approach is aggressive and even cruel, since it involves punishing Helen for actions she doesn't even know are wrong, sometimes by depriving Helen of her dinner. But beneath the surface, Annie's toughness is rooted in genuine respect for Helen—tough love, after all, is still love. Annie knows Helen is capable of living a happy, independent life, and she concludes that the only way to help Helen achieve that goal over the years to come is to be stern with her now. The Kellers' pity for Helen is understandable because it is rooted in love for their child, but Gibson suggests that it is also rooted in a pessimism about Helen's prospects and abilities. Because Annie believes in Helen's capacity to learn and improve, she exercises stricter controls and gets impressive results.

## FAMILY

Another important theme of *The Miracle Worker* is family. The play is set almost entirely within the Keller household, and closely studies the complexities of the relationships between the various family members: Arthur Keller, the family patriarch; Kate Keller, his second wife; James Keller, Arthur's son from a previous marriage; and Helen Keller, Arthur and Kate's child.

If the play's view of family relationships had to be summed up in one sentence, it might be that there is no such thing as an automatically happy family—instead, it takes a surprising amount of work to produce a happy, fruitful family. This point is particularly clear in three different relationships within the family. First, Arthur's relationship with James is initially shown to be strained. While Arthur is portrayed as an overbearing, tyrannical father, James is his sullen, spiteful son who struggles to voice the anger he feels toward his father. The tension between James and his father plays out over the course of the play. On the surface, Kate's relationship with Helen is calmer and gentler than Arthur's relationship with James. However, Gibson shows that there is little genuine love or respect between them. Kate spoils Helen, and in return, Helen learns to expect an endless supply of **candies** and treats from her mother, regardless of how poorly she behaves. Helen doesn't seem to regard her mother with much affection—as far as she's concerned, Kate is just the person who gives her candies. The final important familial relationship the play explores is the one between Annie Sullivan and her deceased brother, Jimmie. Although the two siblings were fiercely loyal as children, Annie feels that she has betrayed her brother: having promised she would always take care of him, she blames herself, irrationally, for his early death. In each of these three cases, the characters feel that they're bound together by a kind of love, rooted in their family ties, and yet there's something uncomfortable and stifling about their relationships. In all of these relationships, one family member takes on a more dominant, controlling role, causing the other family member to feel guilt, anger, or resentment.

On the one hand, Gibson may be suggesting that perhaps there's something inherently inequitable—and uncomfortable—about family. But *The Miracle Worker* also shows how, with hard work, compassion, and patience, families can achieve some form of happiness or maturity that is rooted in mutual respect and understanding, instead of taking one another for granted. With Kate and Annie's encouragement, James learns how to express his feelings to his father, and in return Arthur seems to develop a grudging respect for his young, headstrong son. The two family members learn how to communicate, and in the process they learn more about one another. Much the same is true about Kate and Helen's relationship. Kate learns to respect her daughter instead of merely thinking of her as a helpless animal or a hungry mouth. At the climax of the play, Helen uses sign language to communicate with her mother for the first time—suggesting that she's about to embark on a more nuanced, fulfilling relationship with her.

In *The Miracle Worker*, Gibson suggests that family *can* be a wonderful thing—but rarely is this the case if people are unwilling to work. Perhaps the most interesting example of this idea can be found in Annie's relationship with Jimmie. Over the course of the play, Annie is haunted by flashbacks of her brother's death. By the end of the play, however, she seems to have escaped these flashbacks by developing a new, loving relationship with her pupil, Helen. The implication is that by "saving" Helen, Annie has overcome her guilt and, furthermore, has found a new family to support (and in some ways to replace her old one). In this way, the play closes by making its final important point about family: real family ties have to be earned through hard work and emotional understanding, but this means that people can *create* their own families—even if there isn't any biological connection between them. Gibson makes this point very clearly at the end of his play, when Annie embraces Helen like a daughter and spells, in sign language, "I

love you forever and always." She and Helen have developed a bond strong enough that it is unconditional—like the ideal bond between family members

## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

### WATER

Water is the most overt symbol in *The Miracle Worker*. It's the cornerstone of the play's most famous scene (and one of the most famous scenes in American theater), in which Annie Sullivan pumps water on Helen Keller's hands in order to teach her how to communicate via sign language. This scene—and water as it functions in the play more generally—has a strong religious undertone. In Christianity, water is a symbol of life and beginnings (think of a baptism, for instance). It's apt that water is what inspires Helen Keller to finally understand how to communicate with the external world because in doing so it's as if she has been born anew, baptized in the waters of truth and knowledge. In this way, water symbolizes the miracle of Helen's rebirth.

### KEYS AND LOCKS

Another important symbol in *The Miracle Worker* is the key. Throughout the play, various references are made to keys, keyholes, and locked doors. Often, it is Helen Keller herself who locks the doors—at one point, for instance, she locks Annie Sullivan in her room and then hides the key. For Gibson, keys and locks evoke the way Helen's mind works. Annie sees Helen as a bright young child who is nonetheless barred from learning about the world by her blindness and deafness. Annie aims to "unlock" Helen's potential by teaching her how to communicate through sign language. Therefore, it's wholly appropriate that, just after learning to communicate, Helen presents Annie with the key to the house. Thanks to her teacher, Helen's mind is now "unlocked," completely open to the wonders of the world.

### SMOKED GLASSES

Before Annie Sullivan leaves her school to go to the Kellers' home, her blind students give her a present: a pair of smoked (i.e., tinted) glasses. Annie uses these glasses to protect her eyes, which are still weak after her operation and sensitive to bright lights. Setting aside their practical value, however, the smoked glasses are an important symbol of Annie's past. They remind the audience that Annie herself has struggled with blindness, and knows first-hand—to a limited extent—what Helen Keller is going through. In a way, the smoked glasses establish that Annie is a character with a foot in both worlds: she's an educated woman who has learned how to "see," both literally and metaphorically, and yet she can remember a time when she was blind and cut-off from the world just like Helen.

### DOLLS

There are several dolls in *The Miracle Worker*, including the doll Annie Sullivan brings with her to the Kellers' home and the doll Aunt Ev makes for Helen Keller. Throughout the play, dolls symbolize education. As a child, Annie first learned how to communicate by interacting with a doll, and during her time with Helen she trains Helen to behave by showing her how to take care of a doll. Dolls play an important role in education because they give people like Helen an opportunity to practice new skills and types of behavior.

### SIGHT AND BLINDNESS

As one might expect, *The Miracle Worker* is laden with symbols relating to sight and blindness. At one point, Annie Sullivan makes this symbolism explicit by noting, "Language is to the mind more than light is to the eye." In this way, the play suggests that there are different kinds of "sight," both literal and metaphorical. Helen Keller is literally blind, but more importantly, her blindness and deafness have made her ignorant of the world at large. She knows nothing of language, and therefore nothing of society. She is a wild child, who spends her days rolling around on the floor next to the family dog. This certainly doesn't mean that Gibson is condemning blindness or blind people, but he does use Keller's blindness as a metaphor for other types of ignorance. Helen overcomes her debilitating condition by learning to "see," in the sense that she learns how to communicate through sign language, which in turn enables her to learn about the world.

### CANDY

## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribner edition of *The Miracle Worker* published in 2008.

### Act 1 Quotes

❝ KELLER: Katie. How many times can you let them break your heart?
KATE: Any number of times.

**Related Characters:** Kate Keller, Captain Arthur Keller (speaker), Helen Keller

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 7

**Explanation and Analysis**

Arthur and Kate Keller's child, Helen Keller, is born a healthy baby, but loses her ability to see and hear after a serious fever. As a result, Arthur and Kate (especially Kate) feel a constant sense of pain and guilt while raising Helen. Kate believes that she has a duty to teach Helen how to communicate—no simple task, considering her condition. Kate convinces Arthur to contact doctors and teachers across the country (Arthur owns a newspaper, making this easier) and ask them to teach Helen. While dozens of educators come to the Keller house trying to help the Kellers' child, none succeed. Arthur is initially willing to give up altogether: he is resigned to letting Helen grow up without the ability to speak or write. But Kate is more persistent. She is willing to hire more doctors, even if it means risking more "heartbreak," as Arthur suggests here.

The passage establishes the basic dynamic between Arthur and Kate, with Arthur the gruff, harshly "realistic" parent and Kate the more compassionate, hopeful one. In the end, of course, it is Kate's hopefulness that triumphs.

ANAGNOS: Deaf blind, mute—who knows? She is like a little safe, locked, that no one can open. Perhaps there is a treasure inside.

**Related Characters:** Anagnos (speaker), Annie Sullivan, Helen Keller

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 13

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Mr. Anagnos, the director of the Perkins Institute for the Blind (a real-life school for blind students), comments on Helen Keller's situation. Anagnos is preparing his former student, Annie Sullivan, for her upcoming position as Helen Keller's teacher. He describes Helen's mind as being trapped in "a little safe." Helen has a working mind, but she lacks any of the usual ways of expressing her thoughts and feelings: she doesn't yet know how to speak, or write, or use sign language. It is Annie's job, in short, to teach Helen how to "open" her mind, finding a way of expressing her innermost thoughts and, in turn, learning about the external world, as well. The passage is in this way consistent with imagery Gibson uses later in the play to describe Helen's mind: it's a locked door, a hidden secret, a safe—all images suggesting something hidden from view but very valuable.

BOY'S VOICE [in terror]: Annie! Annie, don't let them take me-Annie!

**Related Characters:** James Sullivan / "Jimmie" (speaker), Annie Sullivan

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 18

**Explanation and Analysis**

Early in the play, readers learn that Annie Sullivan, the teacher who has been sent to educate Helen Keller, is haunted by her own past. At various points, the stage lights dim, signaling that Annie is experiencing a traumatic memory. These memories are usually accompanied by strange, echoing voices—such as this voice, crying Annie's name again and again. For the time being, it's not entirely clear who the voice belongs to. But gradually, it becomes clear that the boy is Jimmie Sullivan, Annie's beloved younger brother, who dies when Annie is still a child. Annie seems to hold herself personally responsible for Jimmie's tragic death. In this way, the passage establishes Annie's character "arc." Over the course of the play, Annie will struggle to rescue Helen from her own ignorance of the world and fear. By saving one young child, Annie is, in a sense, trying to redeem herself for what she sees as her failure to save her own brother years before.

ANNIE: I have three big advantages over Dr. Howe that money couldn't buy for you. One is his work behind me, I've read every word he wrote about it and he wasn't exactly what you'd call a man of few words. Another is to be young, why, I've got energy to do anything. The third is, I've been blind.

**Related Characters:** Annie Sullivan (speaker), Helen Keller, Dr. Howe

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 24

**Explanation and Analysis**

Annie Sullivan arrives in Alabama and meets the Keller family. The Kellers—particularly James and Arthur—are somewhat doubtful about Annie's abilities (especially because of her youth, and because of the family's anti-"Yankee" bias). Sensing all this, Annie lists some of her qualifications. In spite of her youth, Annie is an educated woman, who understands techniques for educating people with disabilities. She also has the energy necessary to spend long hours working with Helen—unlike some of the more eminent doctors who have worked with Helen, Annie won't burn out easily.

The third reason Annie gives is probably the most important. Annie has been blind herself, so she knows exactly what it's like not to have control of her eyes, and this gives her a unique window into Helen's consciousness—one which no other teacher or doctor has had. As a result, Annie is able to understand exactly what Helen is going through, and tailor her lessons accordingly. This, Gibson suggests, is the essence of being a good teacher: having the compassion and respect to put yourself in your pupil's shoes and revise your methods accordingly to help the pupil learn.

KELLER: Here's a houseful of grownups can't cope with the child, how can an inexperienced half-blind Yankee schoolgirl manage her?

**Related Characters:** Captain Arthur Keller (speaker), Annie Sullivan, Helen Keller

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 28

**Explanation and Analysis**

Captain Arthur Keller's anti-Northern bias is palpable in this passage. Annie Sullivan has just arrived in Alabama from Massachusetts—a state that, for the wealthy, genteel Keller family, symbolizes everything wrong with Northern culture. Bostonians, Arthur claims, are rude, uncivilized, and generally incapable of following directions. Therefore, Arthur finds it unlikely that Annie will be able to teach Helen anything. The play is full of allusions to the legacy of the Civil War (it takes place in the 1880s, about two decades after the war ended with a Northern victory). One could even interpret the play as something of a metaphor for the way the Northern United States began to assert cultural and political dominance in the years leading up to and following the Civil War, imposing its own values and economic structures on the rest of the country. In this way, Gibson shows that national tensions inflect the interpersonal dynamics between characters.

ANNIE: All right, Miss O'Sullivan. Let's begin with doll.

**Related Characters:** Annie Sullivan (speaker), Helen Keller

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 29

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Annie begins her lessons with Helen. Annie has brought with her several items, including a large doll, which she intends to use to educate her new student. The doll clearly has special significance for Annie, since Annie began her education at the Perkins Institute for the Blind by studying a doll and, presumably, learning the words to describe it. It's for this reason that Annie seems to be addressing herself in this passage—by educating Helen, Annie is in a sense revisiting her own early education, except this time she's the teacher. Annie is an effective teacher for Helen because she knows exactly what it's like to be a blind student. On a similar note, Annie's work with Helen is especially affecting for Annie because it causes Annie to remember her own early life—not just her education, but also her experiences with her brother, Jimmie Sullivan. This passage is the reader's first explicit indication that the process of teaching Helen will be a deeply personal one for Annie herself.

JAMES: Spell, she doesn't know the thing has a name, even.

**Related Characters:** James Sullivan / "Jimmie" (speaker),

Helen Keller, Annie Sullivan

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 31

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, James Keller—the sullen, cynical son of Arthur Keller—watches Annie teaching Helen Keller how to spell. James makes an annoying but nevertheless valuable point: there doesn't seem to be any reason to teach Helen how to spell, considering that she doesn't know what spelling, names, or meaning are.

Annie has a good answer prepared for James's question—you have to teach a child words before the child understands meaning, not the other way around—but the question is an important one. On the surface, it may seem counterintuitive that Annie would begin with words themselves rather than the concept of meaning. It's also interesting that James spends so much time pestering Annie. James is a laconic, bored young man, and because he's so restless, he's immediately drawn to Annie, the newest and therefore most interesting person in his life.

ANNIE: You think I'm so easily gotten rid of? You have a thing or two to learn, first. I have nothing else to do.

**Related Characters:** Annie Sullivan (speaker), Helen Keller

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 40

**Explanation and Analysis**

The first act ends with Helen Keller tormenting Annie Sullivan, her new teacher. Helen hits Annie, drawing blood, and locks Annie in her room, hiding the key. These antics prove, first of all, that Helen is a wild, frustrated child. But they also suggest that Helen isn't as ignorant as Arthur and James sometimes suggest she is. In reality, Helen is a bright young person (for example, she cleverly hid the key from a household of adults) but she has the massive disadvantage of being unable to see or hear.

This passage, ultimately, is about Annie much more than it's about Helen. Annie is frustrated with Helen (and, in a different way, with the Keller family more generally). But she refuses to give up—and this makes her different from the other doctors and teachers who've come to the Keller household intending to educate Helen. It could even be argued that Annie's greatest asset as a teacher isn't her intelligence or her training, but rather her persistence. In the end, she succeeds in teaching Helen not because she's particularly brilliant or inventive, but because she never gives up.

## Act 2 Quotes

ANNIE: Any baby. Gibberish, grown-up gibberish, baby-talk gibberish, do they understand one word of it to start? Somehow they begin to. If they hear it, I'm letting Helen hear it.

**Related Characters:** Annie Sullivan (speaker), Helen Keller, Kate Keller

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 44

**Explanation and Analysis**

At the beginning of Act Two, Annie continues to work one-on-one with Helen, showing her the hand signals for various basic English words. Kate Keller watches Annie working with Helen, and poses a question James Keller asked already: what's the point of teaching Helen how to spell if Helen doesn't even know what a word is? This time, Annie gives Kate a proper answer to the question. Helen will only be able to understand the concept of meaning if she understands sign language (or at least a couple words in sign language) already—in other words, the horse has to go before the cart. Annie strengthens her point by comparing her methods to those all parents use with their babies: parents talk to their children long before their children can understand what they're saying. This is another sign that, fundamentally, Annie aims to treat Helen like any other child and believes that Helen's mind is no different from the mind of a child who can see and hear.

KATE: Miss Annie. You see, she's accustomed to helping herself from our plates to anything she—
ANNIE [Evenly]: Yes, but, I'm not accustomed to it.

**Related Characters:** Annie Sullivan, Kate Keller (speaker), Helen Keller

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 47-48

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, the Kellers are sitting at dinner and, as usual, Helen is stealing food from others' plates and eating it with her bare hands. The unusual part of this scene, however, is the presence of Annie Sullivan, Helen's new teacher. Annie refuses to indulge Helen's behavior. She tries to correct and improve it, depriving Helen of food in order to train her to exercise restraint and learn some manners. Annie's aggressive teaching methods anger Captain Arthur Keller, who is accustomed to letting Helen do more or less whatever she wants. The passage is a good example of how Annie injects some much-needed order and discipline into the Keller household. With her outsider's perspective on things, she immediately identifies what the problem is: Helen's parents let her do whatever she wants, so it's no wonder Helen never learns to spell or communicate.

KATE: My Helen—folded her napkin—
(And still erect, with only her head in surrender, KATE for the first time that we see loses her protracted war with grief; but she will not let a sound escape her, only the grimace of tears comes, and sobs that shake her in a grip of silence.)

**Related Characters:** Kate Keller (speaker), Helen Keller

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 59

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this ambiguous passage, Kate Keller learns that Annie Sullivan has made some important progress with Helen Keller. Annie has taught Helen how to fold her napkin—a task that's required the better part of the day for Helen to learn. When Kate learns what Annie has done for her child, she begins to weep. While the audience in a theater obviously wouldn't be reading the stage directions accompanying this action, the stage directions paint Kate's reaction in an unusual light. Kate, Gibson writes, loses her war with grief. This is a slightly surprising way to interpret the scene—one could argue that Helen's achievement is an important one that bodes well for the future. But Kate seems to interpret the situation as tragic; if it takes untold hours for Helen to learn something as simple as napkin-folding, then surely it will take forever for Helen to learn how to talk and write. The passage, then, is perhaps a testament to the strength of Kate's doubts about Helen's chances of succeeding. Kate desperately wants Helen to learn how to communicate—that's why she contacts so many doctors and teachers—but she's secretly frightened that Helen will never succeed, and that may be why she bursts into tears here. On the other hand, perhaps the relief she feels over even a small sign of progress enables her to finally acknowledge her grief over the difficulty that has characterized Helen's life to date.

BOY'S VOICE: You ain't goin' to school, are you, Annie?
ANNIE [whispering]: When I grow up.
BOY'S VOICE: You ain't either, Annie. You're goin' to stay here take care of me.
ANNIE: I'm goin' to school when I grow up.
BOY'S VOICE: You said we'll be together, forever and ever and ever–
ANNIE [fierce]; I'm goin' to school when I grow up!

**Related Characters:** Annie Sullivan, James Sullivan / "Jimmie" (speaker), Helen Keller

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 61

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this flashback scene, the adult Annie Sullivan is tormented by her memories of arguing with her deceased brother, James Sullivan. As children, Annie and James promised to take care of each other forever. But Annie wanted to go to a school for the blind—something which required her to move away from James. James was distressed by this news, and shortly afterwards, he died, making Annie feel incredibly guilty. Although Annie later reports all of this to the Kellers, this passage doesn't make Annie's complicated history clear all at once. Rather, Gibson allows readers to piece together Annie's backstory very slowly, simultaneously coming to a better understanding of why, exactly, Annie is so persistent—and so reluctant to turn her back on the young, helpless Helen Keller.

ANNIE: Mrs. Keller, I don't think Helen's worst handicap is deafness or blindness. I think it's your love. And pity.

**Related Characters:** Annie Sullivan (speaker), Helen Keller, Kate Keller

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 66

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Annie Sullivan stands up to Arthur and Kate Keller and tells them the plain truth: the reason that Helen Keller hasn't yet learned how to read and communicate is that her parents spoil her. Arthur and Kate obviously love their child, and want to treat her nicely—but after a certain point, their kindness becomes counterproductive. Kate in particular is reluctant to punish Helen for her misbehavior, and the result is that Helen is emboldened to misbehave again and again. Furthermore, it sends Helen the message that there's no point in her concentrating on learning to communicate. Recognizing all of this, Annie proposes that she be given total control over Helen, so that she might exercise real discipline over her student, and teach Helen how to understand sign language.

ANNIE: The first year we had eighty, seventy died. The room Jimmie and I played in was the deadhouse, where they kept the bodies till they could dig—
KATE [closes her eyes]: Oh, my dear—
ANNIE: —the graves.
(She is immune to KATE's compassion.)
No, it made me strong. But I don't think you need send Helen there. She's strong enough.

**Related Characters:** James Sullivan / "Jimmie", Kate Keller, Annie Sullivan (speaker), Helen Keller

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 69

**Explanation and Analysis**

Annie Sullivan continues to tell Kate and Arthur Keller about her own early life. She and her brother James Keller grew up in abject poverty and later were moved into a state almshouse (something like a homeless shelter). Life in the almshouse was miserable, with people dying left and right. The remarkable thing about this passage, however, isn't the horrors that Annie describes to Kate and Arthur—rather, it's how passively and emotionlessly Annie describes those horrors. Even when Kate makes a sympathetic noise, Annie ignores her response and goes on describing the almshouse. She has lived in pain for so many years that she's immune to sympathy from others. Annie implies this is the reason why she refuses to show Helen any sympathy, either: she loves Helen dearly, and that's why she's so hard on her. Annie is living proof that a blind girl can lead a successful life without the pity of other people—and so Annie tries to help Helen lead a happy life by treating her sternly.

JAMES: That she isn't. That there's such a thing as- dullness of heart. Acceptance. And letting go. Sooner or later we all give up, don't we?
ANNIE: Maybe you all do. It's my idea of the original sin.

**Related Characters:** Annie Sullivan, James Keller (speaker), Helen Keller

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 73

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this scene, audiences get a better sense for Annie's personality—as well as James's. James Keller tries to tease Annie for being so persistent in her teaching—he's baffled and bemused that she would spend long hours teaching Helen the signs for words Helen doesn't even understand. But when he tries to ridicule Annie for doing exactly this, his plan backfires. Annie claims that she despises the idea of giving up—it's her idea of a sin. From their exchange, it's clear that Annie thinks of James as someone who has given up—someone who has resigned himself to being unhappy and is too lazy to do anything *about* his own unhappiness. However, the passage also marks an important turning point in the play: Annie's strong work ethic and incurable optimism begin to inspire James to stand up to his father and make an effort to improve his own life.

JAMES [in pain] Don't—
KATE: Captain.
KELLER: He's afraid.
(He throws JAMES away from him, with contempt.)
What *does* he want out of me?
JAMES [AN OUTCRY]: My God, don't you know?
(He gazes from KELLER to KATE.)
Everything you forgot, when you forgot my mother.

**Related Characters:** Captain Arthur Keller, Kate Keller, James Keller (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 75-76

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this scene, James's impudence becomes too much for Captain Arthur Keller to bear. James mocks his father, obliquely, and Arthur responds by twisting James's arm until James cries out in pain. This violent confrontation is enough to make James say, explicitly, what he has always been too intimidated to say: he resents his father for remarrying a younger woman, and in doing so, forgetting about James's mother.

James's relationship with his father clearly isn't good—but this is one of the only times in the play when Gibson gives some indication of *why* their relationship is so strained. James clearly resents his father, but most of the time, he refuses to say so directly. Instead, he hides behind a wall of sarcasm and cheap humor, burying his emotions because he's too frightened to come to terms with them. As Annie begins to make progress with Helen, however, James is inspired to communicate with his father more directly.

## Act 3 Quotes

JAMES: What does he want from me?
KATE: That's not the question. Stand up to the world, Jimmie, that comes first.
JAMES [A PAUSE, WRYLY]: But the world is him.
KATE: Yes. And no one can do it for you.
JAMES: Kate.
(His voice is humble.)
At least we—Could you—be my friend?
KATE: I am.

**Related Characters:** Kate Keller, James Keller (speaker), Captain Arthur Keller

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 86

**Explanation and Analysis**

Early in Act Three, James and Kate have a heart-to-heart. James admits that he's frustrated with his father. In part, James dislikes his father (because, as we learned in Act Two, he resents that his father remarried). But in part, James is mystified by his gruff, intimidating father, and is unsure what Arthur wants from him. Kate's advice is simple but useful: she tells James that he'll never learn what Arthur wants from him until he stands up to him. He has to take a leap of faith—assert his own values and opinions—if he's ever to have a decent, respectful relationship with his father. Otherwise, James will continue hiding behind sarcasm and secretly fearing and resenting Arthur.

The passage is one of several turning points in Act Three. *The Miracle Worker* is about communication and how the art of communication can facilitate miracles. Gibson plants the seed for one such miracle when Kate inspires James to communicate more directly with his father.

ANNIE: Yes, what's it to me? They're satisfied. Give them back their child and dog, both housebroken, everyone's satisfied. But me, and you.

**Related Characters:** Annie Sullivan (speaker), Captain Arthur Keller, Kate Keller, Helen Keller

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 94

**Explanation and Analysis**

After two weeks of trying to teach Helen Keller how to understand language, Annie Sullivan has almost given up. Arthur Keller is prepared to take Helen back into the house, where—Annie knows full well—Helen will be spoiled and regress, unlearning all the valuable lessons in politeness and manners that Annie has taught her. But Annie refuses to let this happen. Helen's father, Annie understands, doesn't really seem to care whether Helen can communicate or not. He just wants an obedient, easy-to-manage daughter—one who can be quiet and behave herself and not cause a fuss. Annie finds this simply disgraceful: from her perspective, Arthur wants Helen to be a pet, no different than a dog. Annie's goals for Helen are far more ambitious: she wants to teach Helen how to use language and to become her best possible self.

JAMES [LIGHTLY]: And Jacob was left alone, and wrestled with an angel until the breaking of the day and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him; and the angel said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And Jacob said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. Amen.

**Related Characters:** James Keller (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 101

**Explanation and Analysis**

The Keller family, including Helen, as well as Annie Sullivan,

back from the garden house, returns to the main house and sits down to eat. At supper, James says grace. He chooses an unusual verse from the Bible—the story of Jacob, who wrestled with an angel. In this story, Jacob's struggle with the divine messenger wounds him, but also brings him closer to God—and, just as James says here, he is blessed as a reward.

The Bible passage that James reads could be seen as a metaphor for Annie's struggle with Helen. For most of the play, Annie has disagreed with the Kellers about the right way to educate Helen. Arthur and Kate believe that Annie should exercise restraint and treat Helen very gently, while Annie believes that she should be firm and strict with Helen. This means that Annie spends a great deal of her time struggling with Helen (and at times, Helen and Annie literally *do* struggle and wrestle on the floor).

The Bible passage could also be interpreted as a metaphor for James's own relationship with his father: inspired by Annie and Kate, James has decided that the only way to have a mature relationship with Arthur (and perhaps, the only way to learn how to love him) is to stand up to Arthur, even if that means arguing with him. The story of Jacob, in other words, is a pointed allusion to the value that often emerges from even the most difficult struggles.

JAMES: She's right, Kate's right, I'm right, and you're wrong. If you drive her away from here it will be over my dead-chair, has it never occurred to you that on one occasion you might be consummately wrong?

**Related Characters:** James Keller (speaker), Kate Keller, Annie Sullivan, Captain Arthur Keller, Helen Keller

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 107

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this crucial moment, James Keller finally stands up to his father, Captain Arthur Keller. Throughout the play, James has been sullen and sarcastic around his father: he's forever cracking jokes about his father's air of gruff authority, which Arthur usually finds very annoying. It's pretty obvious that James resents his father, but it's also pretty clear that James lacks the courage to stand up to his father and say exactly how he's feeling. But after paying attention to Annie and Helen's lessons, James seems to find the courage to stand up for himself. Instead of using language as a shield to disguise his real feelings, he uses language as a way to make it perfectly clear what he believes. Thus, he asks Arthur if he's ever considered that he could be wrong. While the question seems pretty innocent, there's a definitive statement behind it: James is suggesting that Arthur isn't as capable and all-knowing as he often pretends to be. In the process, James makes it equally clear that he, James, isn't willing to put up with Arthur's arrogant stubbornness any longer. In this way, the play isn't just about teaching Helen to communicate—it's also about James's process of learning to communicate, too.

HELEN: Wah. Wah.

**Related Characters:** Helen Keller (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 108

**Explanation and Analysis**

This is the most famous moment in *The Miracle Worker*. Annie Sullivan, desperate to teach her pupil, Helen Keller, the concept of meaning, spells out the symbol for "water" on Helen's hand, and then runs her hand over water from a water pump. By alternating between the symbol and the real thing, Annie finally succeeds in teaching Helen the key lesson of language: that things have names. She utters her first word—the same word she spoke when she was six months old, shortly before catching the fever that made her deaf-blind.

The passage is the culmination of Annie's countless hours of patient instruction. It's worth noting that Helen finally learns the concept of language because Annie is an incredibly persistent teacher. The technique that Annie uses to teach Helen here is the exact same one she's been using for the last two weeks. Hard work and optimism, it would seem, win out over erudition and intelligence. It's also worth mentioning the religious symbolism here: water is an important symbol of life and rebirth in many different religions, including but not limited to Christianity (the baptismal ritual, for example). So it's appropriate that Helen is "reborn" with knowledge in the same instant that she runs her hands over the water.

(KATE moves to HELEN, touches her hand questioningly, and HELEN spells a word to her. KATE comprehends it, their first act of verbal communication, and she can hardly utter the word aloud, in wonder, gratitude, and deprivation; it is a moment in which she simultaneously finds and loses a child.)

KATE: Teacher?

**Related Characters:** Kate Keller (speaker), Helen Keller

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 111

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this poignant scene, Gibson describes Kate as simultaneously finding and losing her child, Helen. Helen has just learned how to communicate via sign language. Using the signs Annie has been teaching her for the last two weeks, she learns the names for the objects and people in her life: first water, then the stairs leading into her house, then "mother" (for Kate) and "teacher" (for Annie). When Helen first communicates with Kate, touching her hand to spell out a word, the word she spells is not "mother"—it's "teacher."

One way to interpret this scene is that, over the course of their time together, Helen has come to think of her relationship with Annie as being more valuable and important than her relationship with her own biological mother. Kate brought Helen into the world, but Annie has brought into the "world of knowledge" by teaching her language. Kate is the one who's hired Annie, but it's not until this moment that she realizes the full implications of what she has hired Annie to do. It's no coincidence that, in the final moments of the play, Helen gravitates to Annie, her teacher, not Kate, her mother. Helen has, in a sense, chosen Annie's tough style of education over Kate's softer style of parenting.

ANNIE: I, love, Helen.
(She clutches the child to her, tight this time, not spelling, whispering into her hair.)
Forever, and—
(She stops. The lights over the pump are taking on the color of the past, and it brings ANNIE's head up, her eyes opening in fear; and as slowly as though drawn she rises, to listen, with her hand on HELEN's shoulders. She waits, waits, listening with ears and eyes both, slowly here, slowly there: and hears only silence. There are no voices. The color passes on, and when her eyes come back to HELEN she can breathe the end of her phrase without fear:)
—ever.

**Related Characters:** Annie Sullivan (speaker), Helen Keller

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 112

**Explanation and Analysis**

The play ends by bringing Annie's "character arc" to a close. Throughout the play, Annie has suggested that she is motivated to help Helen in part because of her guilt over the death of her beloved brother, Jimmie Sullivan. She experiences vivid, traumatic flashbacks, signaled by the dimming of the lights. Here, at the end of the play, the lights dim, but no echoing voices are heard—Jimmie's vanished spirit doesn't seem to haunt her any longer.

The message, perhaps, is that by educating Helen, Annie has redeemed herself in her own eyes. She feels horrible for abandoning Jimmie to go to school, and blames herself (irrationally, it would seem) for Jimmie's death. By refusing to abandon Helen, as so many other doctors have done, Annie not only frees her pupil from ignorance—she also manages to free herself from a lifetime of guilt and trauma.

Finally, it's important to consider the message that Annie sends to Helen: she tells Helen that she'll love her forever and ever. In real life, Annie Sullivan remained very close friends with Helen until her death. Evidently, Annie thought of Helen as more than just a student. The play's ending is somewhat poignant, however, especially considering the preceding action. By teaching Helen how to communicate, Annie Sullivan has done exactly what Kate Keller hired her to do—and yet, in doing so, Annie has in some ways drawn Helen away from Kate, forging her own close, almost maternal relationship with Helen.

## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

### ACT 1

The play begins late at night in Tuscumbia, Alabama, in the 1880s. A couple—a young woman named Kate Keller and a "hearty gentleman in his forties" named Captain Arthur Keller—are standing around a crib, talking to a doctor. The doctor says, "She'll live."

*The opening scene of the play introduces the audience to the Kellers, a well-to-do Southern couple with a newborn baby who, presumably, has faced serious health complications in her young life. In this way, the first scene of the play establishes that the very fact of Helen's survival past infancy is, in itself, a miracle.*

Arthur Keller explains to the doctor that he has raised two children already, but that this is his wife Kate's first child. The doctor advises the couple to wait for their baby daughter to get well again, adding that she's been suffering from a mysterious "congestion of the stomach and brain." He notes that he's never seen a baby with more vitality and then bids the couple good night.

*Arthur Keller is considerably older than his second wife. Little information is given about what happened with his first wife. Right away, he strikes a tone of gruff worldliness, lording it over everyone else in the room. Notice, also, that the doctor describes Helen as an unusually strong, perseverant child despite her health issues, foreshadowing the miraculous things she will achieve later in life.*

While Arthur Keller walks the doctor outside, Kate embraces her baby, murmuring that Arthur will post an editorial in his newspaper. Suddenly, she notices that the baby, whose name is Helen, doesn't seem to be able to see. She shouts her child's name, but the child doesn't respond in any way. She calls Arthur and explains that Helen doesn't blink or respond to loud noises.

*Kate realizes that Helen has lost her ability to see or hear, setting in motion the events of the rest of the play, which centers around Helen's deafness and blindness. The passage also establishes that Arthur owns a newspaper, partially explaining the Keller family's wealth—and how Arthur is able to contact so many elite doctors across the country.*

Five years pass. Helen, now a little girl, sits outside by a **water** pump, next to a dog and two black children named Martha and Percy, who are cutting paper with a pair of scissors. Helen is **blind** and deaf, and she thrusts her hands around, occasionally hitting Martha and Percy. When Helen brushes Percy's mouth with her hand, Percy bites her hand, and Helen recoils. Helen begins biting her own fingers. Then, Helen pushes Martha and grabs the scissors. Martha screams.

*Helen has grown into a wild child. She lacks two of the most important tools for learning about the world (sight and hearing), and as a result she has developed into a uncontrolled, unpredictable, and violent child an age when other children her age are already learning to talk and behave themselves. This passage is the first indication of what a challenge it will be for Helen to simply learn to interact with other people.*

Another part of the stage is illuminated, revealing the rest of the Keller family sitting inside their home. Captain Arthur Keller sits at the table studying a newspaper while Aunt Ev sews a doll and a young man named James Keller sits by the window watching the children.

*Here the audience meets the residents of the Keller household, in typical form: Arthur studying a paper (presumably his own), Ev doing something nice for Helen, and James doing nothing at all.*

As soon as Helen attacks Martha, Percy rings a bell, which summons Kate Keller to come outside. Kate pulls the scissors out of Helen's hands, and Martha and Percy run off.

*Kate takes the most active role in raising her child: it's she who makes sure that Helen doesn't hurt other children, or get hurt herself. That Kate responds so quickly to the sound of the bell suggests that she is accustomed to handling incidents such as this one.*

As Kate tries to pull Helen into the house, Aunt Ev murmurs, "Something ought to be done for that child." She gives Helen the doll she's been making, and then suggests that Arthur Keller contact a famous oculist she has read about. Arthur refuses to contact this man, pointing out that Helen has visited specialists all over the South. Kate urges Arthur to contact the oculist, prompting Arthur to ask, "How many times can you let them break your heart?" to which Kate replies, "any number of times."

*The Kellers understand that something must be done to help Helen, but they have no clear sense of what that "something" may be. They have evidently tried everything they can think of. Arthur's reluctance to contact the oculist suggests that he has given up hope that Helen will ever change or improve—or at the very least that he is tired of the dealing with his wife's dashed hopes. Fortunately for Helen, however, Kate is more willing to risk further disappointments.*


Meanwhile, Helen runs her fingers over the doll. When she runs her fingers over the doll's face, she notices that the doll has **no eyes** or features, and taps questioningly. Nobody notices.

*Helen is obviously a smart child, though nobody in her family realizes it. She's curious about the world, even if she lacks the tools to express or satisfy her curiosity. The passage shows hoe Helen is reliant on touch to understand the world around her. Perhaps when she notices the absence of eyes on the doll, she instinctively identifies with it.*

Kate asks Arthur Keller for permission to write to the oculist, but Arthur refuses. He stands up and James mutters, "Father stands up, that makes it a fact." He suggests that Arthur send Helen to an asylum, adding, "It's not pleasant to see her about all the time." Furiously, Arthur shouts that nobody will be writing to doctors on Helen's behalf. Instead, Arthur wants to spend more time with Mildred, his and Kate's newest child.

*James is so jaded regarding his half-sister Helen that he's willing to have her committed to an asylum—or at least joke about it. He takes refuge in sarcasm and cynicism to disguise the fact that he is frustrated and deeply unhappy—with his father, with his family more generally, and with himself. But even James's attitude toward Helen is arguably more humane than Arthur's: it seems Arthur would prefer to forget about Helen altogether.*

Helen crawls over to Aunt Ev and pulls at the buttons on Ev's dress. She's annoyed, but then realizes what Helen is trying to do: "she wants the doll to have eyes." Kate takes pins and buttons from the sewing basket, attaches them to the doll, and gives it to Helen.

*Aunt Ev is unusually sensitive to Helen's needs—she pays careful attention to her niece in moments when Arthur and James ignore her. It's surely no coincidence that the women in the Keller family (and the play in general) are depicted as being more attentive than the play's two male characters—the play strongly suggests that women tend to be more nurturing and compassionate than men in general.*


Helen moves over to the cradle in which Mildred is sleeping. Suddenly, she overturns the cradle and Mildred comes tumbling out, but Arthur Keller catches her. Kate shouts to Helen that she mustn't do things like this, and Arthur insists that it's time they start disciplining Helen. Kate points out that it's not Helen's fault that she misbehaves. Kate insists that Helen just wants to "be like you and me." Arthur sighs and promises that he'll write to the oculist.

*Kate is torn: she doesn't want to discipline Helen, but at the same time, this means that Helen is unlikely to change her behavior. Kate wants to teach Helen how to read and write, but seems not to understand how much discipline this will require. This underscores the tension between tough love and pity as an important theme in the play.*

The lights dim, and a man's voice can be heard. The man, whose name is Anagnos, explains that he has written to the Keller family to inquire if they have any need for a "suitable governess," Annie Sullivan from Boston.

*It's worth noting that Annie is introduced by a voice offstage because, throughout the play, Annie is haunted by from her childhood memories. The clever use of sound in this transitional scene foreshadows Annie's struggle to come to terms with her own inner voices.*

The lights go up, revealing a room full of equipment designed for teaching the **blind**. Annie Sullivan, aged twenty, is sitting with her eyes closed. Anagnos addresses Annie, explaining that Annie's position as a governess for the Keller family will be challenging. But of course, Anagnos adds, Annie's time here at Perkins has been difficult, too—one of the only reasons she wasn't expelled is that there was nowhere to expel her *to*. Annie opens her eyes, revealing that she suffers from the "granular growth of trachoma"—a condition because of which she often closes her eyes to avoid the pain of bright light.

*For years, it would seem, Annie has studied at a school run by Mr. Anagnos, who seems to know Annie quite well. (In real life, the Perkins Institute was, and remains, a famous school for blind students.) Annie has suffered from vision problems, but she can see, perhaps symbolizing the way her education at Perkins has given her new abilities and insights. Anagnos's implication that Annie was a difficult student foreshadows the passionate and slightly unorthodox methods she will use to teach Helen.*

Annie asks Anagnos to describe the child she's being sent to teach. Anagnos replies that nobody knows anything about her personality—the child is like "a little safe, locked, that no one can open," adding that "perhaps there is treasure inside." Anagnos also adds that he has told the Kellers nothing of Annie's own personal history. Although Annie thinks this is a good thing, Anagnos suggests that she inform the Kellers, so that they understand that she has "trouble."

*Anagnos's poetic description of Helen Keller suggests an interesting psychological point. Helen, Anagnos implies, has the capability of learning language, but because of her condition, she's unable to learn language in the way most children do, thereby rendering her "locked" like a safe. Gibson will return to this idea of "hidden potential" again and again. Anagnos also implies that Annie has a troubled past, though he doesn't provide any information about it.*

Anagnos reviews Annie's new situation with her. She is now a graduate of the Perkins School. She will teach Helen Keller for twenty-five dollars a month. Finally, Anagnos gives Annie a small gift, a ring. Annie's voice begins to tremble. She tells Agagnos, "everything I am I owe to you." She remembers coming to Anagnos's school years earlier. After "Jimmie died," Annie recalls, she enrolled in the school, where she got her "**eyes** back" and learned "how to help" and "how to live again."

*Annie has just graduated from a school for the deaf, and now she's traveling across the country to try to teach Helen how to communicate. During her time at Perkins, Annie not only learned a lot—she also had an operation that helped her regain her sight. In this way, the play draws a parallel between vision and understanding—or, put slightly differently, between literal and metaphorical forms of "sight."*

Anagnos opens the door and ushers in a group of **blind** children, who announce that they've bought Annie a going-away gift: a pair of **smoked glasses** (i.e., tinted glasses). One of the children explains that Annie's eyes have hurt "since the operation," and the glasses will help her see without pain. The children give Annie another gift—a **doll** with movable eyelids, which can make a "momma" sound. The doll, the children explain, is for Helen. Some of the younger children tell Annie that they don't want her to leave. Annie smiles sadly and says, "I'm a big girl now, and big girls have to earn a living."

*Annie's friends and classmates at Perkins clearly love and respect her, as evidenced by the going-away gifts they give her. The smoked glasses are a physical reminder to the audience that Annie, despite having gained the ability to see, still remembers what it was like to be blind, making her perhaps uniquely well-poised to help those less fortunate than her, who can't see.*

Anagnos shepherds the children out of the room. As Annie thinks back on her past, two echoing voices can be heard. They belong to the young Annie and her brother, James (or Jimmie) Sullivan. The voice of young Annie tells her younger brother, "I'm takin' care of you." Then, a third echoing voice is heard—that of a grown man. The man reports that Annie, aged nine, is "virtually **blind**," while James, aged seven, can't walk without a crutch. The man explains that Annie and her brother will have to be separated. James's voice cries out, "Don't let them take me—Annie!"

*This flashback—the first of many traumatic flashbacks Annie experiences throughout the play—reveals most of the key elements of Annie's backstory. Annie had a beloved brother named James (or Jimmie) that she promised to look after and protect, and seems to feel that she has broken that promise (and may even feel that she had some role in his death). The fact that Annie is haunted by her brother's tragedy after so many years is a clear sign that she's consumed by pain and guilt over what happened to him.*

The lights dim, and when they go up, we're back in the Keller household. Upstairs, Helen sits alone. Downstairs, Kate adjusts her bonnet, while a black servant named Viney attends to her. Kate explains to Viney, "I can't wait to see her." Kate runs upstairs to Helen, who clutches at Kate's skirt, dirtying it. Kate offers Helen a **peppermint**, which Helen eats eagerly.

*Kate spoils her child, giving Helen candies throughout the day, seemingly just because she wants to do something nice for her daughter—without any real regard for whether this will help Helen learn or be good for her. In this way, candies become a symbol in the play for the pity with which Helen's parents treat her (rather than tough love). It's worth noting that the play takes place in the aftermath of the Civil War, when it was common for prominent, aristocratic Southern families like the Kellers to employ black servants like Viney.*

Meanwhile, Arthur Keller arrives downstairs, where he notices that James is dressed nicely. James explains that he's dressing for Annie Sullivan, who's due to arrive today. Kate greets Arthur and tells him that she's headed off to meet Annie. Alone, Arthur studies Helen, who has wandered out onto the porch. He says, "She's gone, my son and I don't get along, you don't know I'm your father, no one likes me." He gives Helen **candy**.

*In a private moment, Arthur reveals himself to have deep insecurities despite the gruff and composed demeanor he maintains as the head of his household. Although for most of the play Arthur is successful in creating the illusion that he is unfazed by the challenges of being Helen's father, here he reveals that he is a complex character with conflicting thoughts and feelings of his own.*

The lights dim, revealing Annie Sullivan standing outside a railroad station, where James and Kate are waiting. James greets her and introduces himself. Annie replies, "I had a brother Jimmie." James explains he's Helen's half-brother and adds, "You look like half a governess." Annie greets Kate and observes that Kate hasn't brought Helen along. Kate is surprised that Annie is so young, and wonders if anyone has ever succeeded in teaching a deaf-**blind** child even a fraction of what "an ordinary child" learns. Annie admits that the answer is no.

*James immediately feuds with Annie, belittling her for no discernible reason, as he often does. The fact that James shares a name with Annie's deceased brother could be read to foreshadow the ways in which working for the Kellers will force Annie to relive her painful past and come to terms with her relationship with her beloved brother. The challenge ahead of Annie is formidable—indeed, Helen was the first blind-deaf person ever to earn a college degree, proving that educating the deaf-blind was entirely unheard of in the 19th century.*

Annie, recognizing that Kate looks dismayed, tries to "take the bull by the horns." She admits that she's young and inexperienced, but that she has some advantages, too: she's energetic, she has studied the "reports" of Dr. Howe (the doctor the Kellers previously hired), and, finally, she herself was formerly **blind**. Annie will begin by teaching Helen language—and language, she explains, 'is to the mind more than light is to the eye."

*The last advantage Annie lists is surely the most important. Unlike Dr. Howe, Annie actually knows what it's like to be blind and, as a result, isolated from the external world. But of course, Annie is also an intelligent teacher. The analogy she draws between language and light isn't purely fanciful—rather, it's one that Gibson uses throughout the play, using sight as a metaphor for other forms of knowledge and wisdom.*

The lights dim, and when they rise, Annie, James, and Kate are coming back to the house. Arthur Keller greets Annie politely, just as Helen Keller rushes through the room and out to the porch, chasing after the family dog, Belle. Helen is messy-looking, and her shoes are untied.

*Annie's first impressions of Helen are telling: Helen is wild, disorderly, and in her behavior is barely distinguishable from Belle, the dog. It's Annie's mission to teach Helen how to behave like a human being, not an animal.*

Annie hesitates, and then follows Helen, "entering her world." She crouches down and, gently, touches Helen's hand. Helen feels Annie's hand, then her arm, and finally her face. Then, she finds Annie's suitcase. She tries to open the suitcase, but when Annie stops her, she begins to push and fight with Annie. Helen lugs the suitcase into the house, and Annie helps Helen get it up into the room where Annie will be staying.

*As the stage directions suggest, Annie excels at teaching because she's able to see the world from her pupil's point of view. She doesn't think of herself as an authority whose job is to dispense lessons to Helen; rather, she tries to understand what Helen is going through so she can better determine how to communicate with her. She's able to do this so well in part because she has struggled with blindness herself.*

As Annie meets Helen, Arthur and Kate talk about Annie. Kate likes her, but Arthur finds her "rough," remarking that northerners "certainly rear a peculiar kind of young woman." Arthur notices Annie's **smoked glasses**, and Kate explains that Annie was **blind**, and has had nine eye operations. Arthur mutters, "here's a houseful of grownups can't cope with the child, how can an inexperienced half-blind Yankee schoolgirl manage her?"

*The passage alludes to the tension between the Northern and Southern United States in the era following the Civil War. Many Southerners regard the "Yankees" (i.e., northerners) as uncouth and disrespectful, and Arthur seems to be no exception. His use of the word "rough" also implies that he looks down on her for being from a lower class background than he is.*

Meanwhile, in her room, Annie gives Helen a **key**. Helen uses the key to open the suitcase. She finds a big shawl inside, and wraps it around her body, then puts on Annie's bonnet and **smoked glasses** as well. Then, she finds Annie's drawers (i.e., underwear), and a large **doll**. Helen seems to like the doll. Annie, amused, murmurs, "All right, Miss O'Sullivan. Let's begin with the doll."

*Notice that Helen is dressing like Annie; furthermore, Annie addresses Helen as herself. The implication is that Annie is remembering the lessons Anagnos taught her while she was a young child and new at the Perkins Institute. She sees it as her responsibility to help struggling blind children, just as her teachers once helped her.*

Annie takes Helen's hand and gently manipulates the fingers, spelling out "**D-O-L-L**" in sign language. James, who's been watching from the doorway, says, "You spell pretty well." Annie explains that she's using "an alphabet for the deaf." To Annie's delight, Helen repeats the finger movements exactly. James, unimpressed, asks, "You think she knows what she's doing?" Annie next takes away the doll, hoping that Helen will spell its name to get it back, but instead Helen becomes enraged and swings her arms, causing the shawl, **glasses**, and bonnet to fall off of her. James says, "She doesn't know the thing has a name, even," and Annie, exasperated, shuts the door in his face.

*James puts on his usual display of cynicism. He suggests that Annie will never be able to teach Helen anything of substance, meaning that her work is pointless. Even though he's being nasty, James is clearly interested in Annie's work with Helen, and seems also to want to interact with Annie. In this regard, he comes across as an immature character who is unable to clearly communicate about his own hopes, fears, and desires.*

Alone with Helen, Annie produces a piece of cake from her suitcase, and holds it under Helen's nose. Then, she spells out C-A-K-E. When Annie pulls the cake away, Helen immediately spells out C-A-K-E. To reward Helen, Annie gives her the cake, which Helen eats immediately.

*Annie tries a variety of techniques designed to get Helen to understand what language is. Here, she tries to use a simple reward system, whereby Helen gets used to making the sign for cake, and eventually comes to associate the sign with the actual food. But Helen is still a long way from understanding the concept of* meaning*—that is, the idea that things have names.*

Annie shows Helen the **doll** again, prompting Helen to spell its name. Helen does so, and Annie gives her the doll as a reward. Satisfied, Annie says, "Imitate now, understand later." Just then, Helen swings the doll into Annie's face, drawing blood. Helen rushes out of the room, holding the doll, and shuts the door, turning the **key** in the lock. Annie yells out for Helen before she realizes the pointlessness of yelling.

*Helen takes some small steps toward becoming more obedient and well-behaved, but she quickly regresses when she loses interest in Annie and her teaching exercises. For the time being, Annie seems to be incapable of "unlocking" Helen's potential (symbolized, aptly enough, by a literal lock and key).*

James hears Annie's yelling, but instead of unlocking the door, goes out to the porch and sings mockingly to her window, "Buffalo girl, are you coming out tonight." Annie turns to her mirror and realizes that Helen has knocked out one of her teeth.

*As ever, James is self-consciously sarcastic as he observes Annie and Helen. To him, this is all a big joke—a rare moment of entertainment in his otherwise dull life. He seems to care deeply for his sister but uses sarcasm to maintain a cool outward appearance like that of his father, Arthur.*

The lights dim, and echoing voices can now be heard. A boy moans, "Annie, it hurts," and a harsh-sounding elder woman's voice shouts, "shut up!" The boy whispers, "You promised! Forever and ever, you said forever." Then, a man's voice says, "Little girl, I must tell you your brother will be going on a …" but Annie claps her hands to her ears, and the voices stop.

*The parallels between Annie's relationship with Jimmie and her relationship with Helen become clearer: in both cases, Annie feels that she has a personal responsibility to help her younger, weaker companion. Evidently, Annie feels terrible for breaking her promise to take care of Jimmie always, and seems to think of educating Helen as a chance to redeem herself in her own eyes.*

The lights rise. Kate tells James to summon Arthur Keller for supper. James calls out to his father, and when Kate asks where Annie is, James replies, very pleasantly, "In her room." He explains that Helen locked her in her room. Appalled, Kate finds Helen, sitting outside by the **water** pump. She finds that Helen has no **key**. While James cheerfully finds a ladder and carries it outside to Annie's window, Kate tries to figure out where the key might be.

*It's pretty funny that Helen, a young, deaf-blind child, manages to confound a household of adults in full possession of their senses: simply by hiding the key, she throws the house into disarray. This is another sign that Helen is smarter than people give her credit for, and has the capacity to learn a lot about the world.*

Arthur, realizing that Kate will never find the **key**, takes the ladder and climbs up to Annie's room, telling her that he'll have to carry her down. Annie agrees, trying to look "as composed and ladylike as possible." James notices Annie and quips, "might as well leave the l, a, d, d, e, r," implying that she'll likely need it again.

*Annie, recognizing that she has failed her first test with Helen, tries to regain her composure. James, meanwhile, continues with his sarcastic jokes, even if it's becoming clear that he's more interested in Annie and Helen than he means to let on.*

Annie notices Helen sitting by the pump, oblivious to the chaos around her. The lights dim, and Annie walks over to observe her young pupil, a little awed. When Helen is satisfied that she's alone, she opens her mouth, revealing the **key**. Annie can't help but smile: "You devil," she says, "You think I'm so easily gotten rid of? You have a thing or two to learn, first. I have nothing else to do."

*As Act One closes, Annie shows a grudging respect for her wild and unpredictable pupil. She realizes that Helen is clearly a smart kid—she managed to hide the key from her mother, after all—and also recognizes that Helen is smart enough that she certainly has the capacity to learn sign language. Above all, Annie is an incredibly persistent teacher. She doesn't give up, because she feels she has a personal stake in Helen's education (thanks in part to her relationship with her brother).*

## ACT 2

It is late evening, and Annie's bedroom is the only room in the Keller house with the light on. Helen stands by Annie's desk, playing with her doll. Annie is busy writing a letter, which she reads aloud. In the letter, she explains that nobody in the household has tried to control Helen: therefore, Annie will have to discipline Helen without "breaking her spirit."

*Act Two is all about the discipline that Annie tries to exercise over her young pupil. The challenge, as Annie makes plain here, will be to discipline Helen while still nurturing Helen's potential for learning. In this way, Annie embodies a form of tough love that the Kellers—too willing to reward Helen even for bad behavior—simply don't practice.*

Helen knocks over Annie's inkwell. Annie immediately takes the inkwell and saves her letter, mopping up the spillage. Then, she spells "i-n-k" on Helen's hand. She finds a sewing card with a needle and thread and gives them to Helen. Helen takes the card and accidentally pokes her own finger. Next, Helen throws her **doll** to the ground, and Annie spells "bad girl" on Helen's palm. Next, Annie makes Helen stroke the doll, and then spells, "good girl."

*Annie remains incredibly patient with Helen, even turning Helen's misbehavior into "teachable moments." At the most basic level, Annie is trying to teach Helen the words that represent certain concepts (such as "good" and "bad") in the hopes that, later on, Helen will grasp the concept that things have names and will then be able to understand, in retrospect, what the words mean.*

Kate passes by the doorway and sees what Annie is doing. Annie explains that she's teaching Helen to spell—even though Helen doesn't even know what a word is. Kate is skeptical that this will work, but Annie argues that it's no different from the way Kate talks to Mildred, her baby: adults have to talk to children before children understand. Annie spells "cake" on Helen's hand, and Helen spells it back to her. Kate asks Annie to teach her the alphabet, and Annie promises she will.

*Annie doesn't seem to have a great deal of technical expertise. Instead, what she has is determination and common sense. She recognizes that teaching Helen words she doesn't understand may seem like a big waste of time, but she also knows that doing so is her best chance of educating Helen in the long run.*

Just then, Annie reaches for the sewing card. Helen takes the needle and pokes Annie's finger with it. Just then, Kate gives Helen some **candy**, which Helen accepts. Annie asks why Kate is rewarding Helen for hurting her, and Kate replies, "We catch our flies with honey, I'm afraid." Kate leads Helen to bed. Alone in her room, Annie writes, "obedience is the gateway through which knowledge enters the mind of the child."

*As Annie spends more time around the Kellers, she begins to grasp why Helen doesn't learn anything: Kate spoils her instead of using a reward system to train her to behave well. Annie's point is that children have to learn how to obey their elders before they can learn anything else: therefore, no discipline equals no learning.*

The lights dim and rise again, signaling that it's morning. Viney comes outside to pump **water**. Inside, Helen is wandering around the table, Annie is studying Helen carefully, and Kate tries to eat her eggs while Helen pokes at the plate. Arthur and James argue about the Civil War, James taking the position that Grant was the superior general of the war. Helen tries to touch Annie's food, and Annie keeps thrusting Helen's hands away from her plate until Helen beings to "flail and make noises."

*Every morning, it would seem, the Kellers go about their business, all the while missing opportunities to teach Helen how to behave. It's a clever detail that Arthur and James argue about the Civil War, with James siding with the Northern general, perhaps foreshadowing the way he'll later side with Annie, the "Yankee" intruder—but perhaps also simply demonstrating that he has a more progressive streak than his father.*

Arthur and Kate explain to Annie that Helen is "accustomed to helping herself from our plates." Annie retorts, "but *I'm* not accustomed to it." Arthur offers to get Annie a fresh plate, but Annie declines, saying that Helen is "spoiled." Arthur protests that Annie should have pity, but Annie replies, "The sun won't rise and set for her all her life." Annie demands that Kate leave Helen alone with her immediately.

*This is a crucial scene. Annie starts to take control, not just over Helen but over the entire Keller family. She also offers a concise version of her education methods: it's irresponsible to spoil children, because sooner or later they're going to have to learn how to take care of themselves, and the sooner the better.*

Furiously, Arthur asks Kate to come outside and talk with him. James leaves also, leaving Annie and Helen alone. While Annie and Helen struggle, Arthur tells Kate that he's on the verge of sending Annie back to Boston. James says that he agrees with Annie.

*Naturally, Arthur doesn't take kindly to Annie's teaching methods: he's too used to being the boss (and possibly too prejudiced against Yankees) to comply to easily with a woman from the north coming into his home and telling him how to raise his own daughter.*

Meanwhile, Annie clears everyone's plates off of the table except for Helen's and her own. She guides Helen's hands toward her plate. Helen grabs her plate and then sinks to the floor. Annie sits down and begins to eat her food. Helen pulls at Annie's chair, trying to topple it. Then she pinches Annie's thighs. She tries to hit Annie's ear. At this point, Annie fights back, slapping Helen on the cheek. At first, Helen tries to fight back, but then she freezes and "thinks better of it."

*After just a couple minutes of fighting with Annie, Helen begins to understand the situation and shows some discipline. The reason for the shift, it seems, is that Annie's isn't afraid to fight back. In other words, a few moments of actual discipline probably teach Helen more about how to behave than years of being spoiled by her mother and father.*

Helen wanders toward Kate's chair, touching it with her hand. Annie goes over to Helen and tries to spell on Helen's hand. But Helen pushes away from Annie toward the front door. Annie catches Helen and lifts her, kicking, back to her chair. The two continue to struggle, knocking over chairs.

*Annie knows that she can't back down when Helen becomes aggressive: if she does, then Helen will get the idea that she can do whatever she wants around Annie. Therefore, Annie continues to push, and their struggle continues.*

Suddenly, Helen hesitates, then reaches her hands toward her own plate. She grabs food off her plate and eats it. When she's eaten all her food, Helen holds out her plate for more. In response, Annie takes a spoon and tries to place it in Helen's hand, even as Helen resists. Annie holds Helen's plate out of reach and then offers her a spoon. Helen at first refuses to use the spoon, but accepts, at which point Annie finally gives her back her plate, signing "Good girl." But just then, Helen pulls Annie's hair and hits her.

*Annie's hard work seems to pay off: after just a couple minutes of fighting, Helen learns the lesson that she has to use a spoon and eat off of a plate. But as it turns out, old habits die hard, and Helen isn't going to give up so easily. This pattern repeats throughout the play: just when Annie thinks she has broken through and accomplished something significant with Helen, Helen reveals that she's just as unruly as she has always been.*

The room goes dark. Meanwhile, Kate, Viney, Aunt Ev, Mildred, Percy, and Martha stand outside. Aunt Ev complains that she's been waiting outside the house all afternoon, and adds that Helen "is a Keller," meaning that she's a cousin to General Robert E. Lee.

*Ev emphasizes the Kellers' status as an elite Southern family, related by blood to General Lee (the main general of the Confederacy during the Civil War). This emphasizes the point that the Kellers don't like Annie in part because she's a strong, confident Northerner.*

Just then, Helen and Annie emerge from the house. They both look exhausted. Triumphantly, Annie announces that Helen ate from her own plate, used a spoon, and folded her napkin. Annie retires to her room. Kate repeats, "My Helen-folded her napkin." She begins to weep, as if she's finally losing "her protracted war with grief."

*After hours of work, Annie appears to have made some real progress. It's surprising, though, that the stage directions characterize Kate's reaction to this news as one of grief. Perhaps Kate realizes that, if it takes hours just to teach Helen something as simple as napkin-folding, it'll take countless years to teach her to speak, showing that even this great victory is, ultimately, just a drop in the bucket. Or, perhaps feeling some small amount of relief and encouragement allows her to finally feel the grief she has repressed over her daughter's difficult life.*

Upstairs, Annie opens her suitcase and finds a battered copy of her "Perkins report." A man's voice can be heard describing a **blind**, deaf, mute woman as being "buried alive." The man wonders, rhetorically, if there is anyone who will save her and "awaken her."

*The man speaking may be Dr. Howe, whose report Annie previously claimed to have studied closely. There is likely very limited scholarship at the time about the lives of deaf-blind people or how to treat them. Again, notice the rhetoric of imprisonment and awakening, suggesting that Annie's role as teacher is to access the hidden reserves of intelligence and curiosity that are buried deep within Helen.*

Suddenly, a boy's voice asks, "Annie, what's that noise?" Annie replies, that somebody is pushing a cot to "the deadhouse." Jimmie asks, "Does it hurt, to be dead?" Next, Jimmie insists that Annie must stay around to take care of him, but Annie insists that she's going to go to school one day. Then, we hear the same male voice we heard earlier: "Little girl, I must tell you. Your brother will be going on a journey, soon." Jimmie's voice cries, "Annie!"

*Annie remembers her traumatic experiences in the almshouse, where she and Jimmie lived as children. The male voice seems to be explaining to Annie that Jimmie is dying. This, the audience can assume, is the horror that Annie is trying to move past: having lost a brother, and then blaming herself for the tragedy.*

Annie gets to her feet and begins putting things in her suitcase. Meanwhile, in the garden house, Arthur and Kate argue about Annie, Arthur claiming that Annie can't be much of a teacher if Helen runs away from her and fights with her. Quietly, Kate points out that even if Helen made a mess of the room, "she folded her napkin."

*Arthur continues to doubt Annie, but Kate has grown to trust her and seems to believe that she has the power to teach Helen something valuable. Notice that, the second time around, Kate treats the news of Helen folding her napkin optimistically: it may be a small victory in the grand scheme of things, but it's still a victory, and bodes well for the future.*

Annie, having packed her suitcase, walks down to the garden house. There, Arthur informs Annie that he has been dissatisfied with her. However, he has tried to make allowances for Annie, given that she's not from the South. He claims he'll only allow Annie to stay if she behaves politely. Annie replies that the situation is hopeless—she'll never be able to teach Helen, so long as she's allowed to run wild. This news startles Kate. Kate tells Annie that Helen has always been bright—she even began talking when she was only six months old—one of her first words was "**water**."

*Annie and Arthur come head to head: Arthur can't tolerate Annie's aggressiveness and general lack of "Southern manners," and Annie can't work with Arthur and Kate's indulgent style of child rearing. Yet, here more than ever, it's clear that Helen is capable of learning how to communicate—she's obviously smart, as evidenced by the fact that she spoke so early in life. The mention of water here also foreshadows Helen's "rebirth" in Act Three.*

Annie tells the Kellers that Helen's worst handicap isn't deafness or **blindness**—it's her own parents' spoiling affection and pity. Annie will never be able to teach Helen, so long as Arthur and Kate spoil her. Annie is willing to stay on, but only if Arthur and Kate give her "complete charge" of Helen, "day and night." Annie demands that she be allowed to live with Helen, alone. She explains, "I packed half my things already."

*Annie stands up to Arthur and explains that Helen's only chance of learning language is to learn discipline first. Therefore, Annie believes that she must have total control of her pupil, without Arthur and Kate diluting her lessons with candy and other treats.*

Annie tells Kate and Arthur about her own childhood. She grew up in "the state almshouse," along with her brother Jimmie. The place was full of old, **blind** women, and younger, diseased people. Annie and Jimmie used to play in a room called the deadhouse, where the dead bodies of almshouse residents were stored until they could be buried. The almshouse was miserable, but it made Annie strong. Kate makes a sympathetic noise, but Annie ignores it.

*This is the most explicit explanation of Annie's early life, clarifying what was only implied previously. Annie doesn't believe that sympathy and pity have a place in a child's development: rather, children need to learn how to be strong and capable. Annie is confident in her educational philosophy because she has actually lived it: she's living proof that children are made stronger by not being coddled.*

Annie suggests that she and Helen live in the garden house, with Percy to help them at times. Arthur irritably consents to all of this, giving Annie two weeks. He then marches out of the garden house.

*The plot of the rest of the play is now set in motion: Annie has two weeks to teach Helen how to communicate. As before, Arthur's behavior here is amusingly blustery—he's gruff but in the end he usually backs down.*

Alone in the garden house, Annie takes Kate's hand and shows her the alphabet. The lights dim while, slowly, the characters move furniture from the house to the garden house. When the lights rise, James is in the garden house with Annie, carrying Annie's suitcase. James points out that Annie doesn't give up easily. Annie explains that she has one important "weapon" against Helen: Helen's enormous curiosity. James suggests, "We all give up, don't we?" Annie replies that giving up is "my idea of original sin."

*Notice that James's respect for Annie and Helen is growing slowly but surely. Even though he continues to take a pessimistic view of things, he seems impressed, in spite of himself, with Annie's resilience. Resilience, this passage confirms, is the core of Annie's determined approach to teaching. Annie keeps on trying the same approach with Helen, showing her the signs for words over and over again, hoping that something will stick.*

As James walks out, Kate and Arthur appear, leading Helen to the garden house. Kate explains that they've been driving through the country for two hours, meaning that, for all Helen knows, she's far away from home. Kate begs Annie, "Please be good to her." Annie promises she will.

*As far as Helen is concerned, she's far away from her parents and her home. In this way, she's been tricked into thinking that she's in Annie's domain, and therefore obliged to do whatever Annie says.*

The Kellers leave Annie and Helen alone, and Helen begins banging around the garden house. She finds her **doll** and is about to throw it when, suddenly, she begins to cry and sinks to the floor.

*Perhaps her crying is a sign that Helen is beginning to surrender to Annie. She no longer seems to have as much energy to fight. Instead, she's frustrated and maybe even willing to begin to cooperate with Annie. Her crying also suggests that she's intelligent and aware enough to understand what goes on around her to some extent—for example, that she has been taken from her home and family.*

Meanwhile, in the house, James Keller mockingly asks Kate, how Annie manages to get everything she wants out of Kate. Furious, Arthur twists James's arm, demanding to know what James wants out of him. James cringes and then cries, "Everything you forgot, when you forgot my mother." James runs offstage.

*James resents his father for many reasons, but the most important would seem to be that Arthur has remarried—an action that James interprets as disrespectful to his mother. In real life, Arthur Keller remarried Kate a year after the death of his first wife.*

Alone, Kate tells Arthur she's proud of him for letting Annie have control over Helen. Arthur wonders aloud why James, his own son, can't stand him. Gently, Kate suggests that Arthur is too hard on James. The lights dim.

*With Kate's encouragement, Arthur is learning to "ease up"—first by letting Annie take control over Helen, and second, perhaps, by being less aggressive and domineering with his son.*

Annie, now in bed in the garden house, is wide-awake. Voices fill the stage. The young boy whose voice the audience heard earlier calls out for Annie again. Suddenly, Annie cries, "No pity, I won't have it. On either of us." She turns to Helen, who is "prone on the floor," and touches Helen's hand. Helen immediately recoils and crawls under the bed. Frustrated, Annie calls out for Percy, who walks sleepily onto the stage.

*As before, Annie is utterly opposed to the concept of pity. She thinks that she must be hard on Helen in order to coax her out of her reluctance to cooperate and learn. The danger of this style of teaching, as the passage makes clear, is that the pupil (Helen) dislikes and even fears her teacher (Annie). In reality, Annie is hard on Helen because she respects Helen and wants her to succeed.*

Annie tells Percy to touch Helen's hand. He does so, and Helen, delighted, emerges from under the bed. She embraces Percy and tries to stick her fingers in his mouth. Then, Helen spells "C-A-K-E" on Percy's hand. Annie has an idea: she begins teaching Percy to spell: first, the word "milk." Helen tries to get between Annie and Percy but Annie brushes her away. Just as Annie had planned, Helen becomes jealous. Annie gives Helen some milk, thanks Percy, and sends him back to bed. Helen crawls into bed, too.

*As Annie spends more time with Helen, she has to develop new techniques to keep her pupil interested in learning. Here, she appeals to Helen's natural sense of jealousy: in order to get Helen interested in something, she offers that thing to someone else, making Helen feel left out. The technique works beautifully, and will potentially be useful for making Helen interested in learning.*

Alone, Annie sits in a rocking chair with Helen's **doll**. Happy with herself, she begins singing a lullaby to the doll "in mock solicitude." As she sings, James, asleep in the main house, turns as if he'd heard the song, followed by Arthur Keller and Kate Keller.

*Annie's lullaby is a little sad—one can imagine her singing to a doll as a child, because she had no other family. This might further suggest that Annie is interested in taking care of others because nobody ever took care of her. And yet the lullaby is also inspirational, as suggested by the Kellers' behavior. Annie's loving devotion to Helen inspires the other Kellers to be bolder and more honest, as Gibson will show in Act Three.*

## ACT 3

The stage is dark as Annie and Helen sit in bed in the garden house. Annie teaches Helen how to spell "**water**" and "egg." She mutters to herself that she needs to find a way to teach Helen what a name is, adding, "it's so simple, simple as birth, to explain."

*Act Three begins with two classic symbols of birth—water and eggs—foreshadowing the miraculous "rebirth" Helen will undergo at the end of the play. Annie's goal here is to teach Helen the concept of meaning—a concept that, like birth, may seem simple, but is in fact so integral to the human condition that it's almost impossible to explain simply.*

Meanwhile, in the house, Arthur is telling Kate that she needs to eat something. Kate complains that she's restless and nervous, but James says that the house has been blissfully silent—a statement that infuriates Arthur. Annie continues to sit with Helen, spelling the word "**water**." Arthur tells James that if he becomes a parent, he'll know what "separation" means—and one of the most painful kinds of separation is "disappointment in a child." Arthur leaves the room and James, suddenly weary, apologizes to Kate for his words. He asks Kate, "what does he want from me?" Kate tells James that James needs to "stand up to the world" before he worries about his father. James admits he doesn't know how to do this, but he asks Kate to be his friend and help him. Kate agrees.

*James and Arthur continue to argue, and yet neither one of them seems to have the courage to tell the other one what they're thinking. Arthur clearly feels remorseful for not having a better relationship with his child. Even though James seems to want to have a better relationship with Arthur, he doesn't give his father any indication of* how *they might become closer—as he doesn't seem to have a clear idea himself. As before, it is Kate who serves as the intermediary between father and son, translating Arthur and James's feelings. With Kate's support, James seems to find the strength to be honest and stand up to his father.*

Meanwhile, in the garden house, Annie, not wearing her **smoked glasses**, writes that she feels deeply "undisciplined" as she teaches Helen. She looks the word up in the dictionary and realizes she was spelling it incorrectly.

*Annie continues to struggle to think of ways to teach Helen how to communicate. The absence of her smoked glasses (which she ordinarily wears to shield her eyes from painful light) suggests the pain and irritation she's willing to endure for Helen's education.*

Just then, Kate enters the garden house and inquires what Annie is doing. Annie quickly puts her **glasses** on again and explains, "Whatever I spell to Helen I'd better spell right." Annie shows Kate that Helen has learned to eat with a spoon. She also explains that she's taught Helen many words. But of course, Helen doesn't know what words *are*. When Helen is sleeping, Annie explains, her hands make "letters when she doesn't know." It's as if there's a part in Helen's mind that "aches to speak out." Annie wants to awaken this part of Helen's mind.

*This is one of the clearest evocations of the way Annie—and Gibson—sees the human mind. Annie believes that there's a part of Helen's mind that yearns to communicate with the external world. It's worth noting that Gibson's wife, Margaret Brenman, was a famous psychologist and Freudian psychoanalyst, so the allusions to the unconscious in this section are likely informed by Gibson's exposure to his wife's studies and practice.*

Just then, Arthur Keller enters the garden house. He explains that he's brought Helen a "playmate," a dog named Belle. Annie reminds him that her two weeks with Helen aren't yet complete—she has until 6pm. Arthur points out that a couple more hours won't make any difference, though he praises Annie for teaching Helen cleanliness and good manners. Teaching Helen to communicate, Arthur continues, is like teaching a dog to spell. But he agrees not to bring Helen back to the house until six. He and Kate exit the garden house, leaving the dog behind.

*Gibson builds up the suspense by giving Annie just a few more hours before her two weeks expire. Arthur seems to want his daughter (and Annie, for that matter) to be respectful and polite, but nothing more. He values order and cooperation, rather than enlightenment and true independence (the things Annie hopes to offer Helen). Arthur's The comparison Arthur makes between Helen and the dog is inappropriate and crude, especially in light of the fact that Helen will later go on to earn a college degree,*

Alone with Helen, Annie spells out "D-O-G" and then touches Helens hand to Belle. Then, she gets a tumbler of **water** and thrusts Helen's hand into it. Helen removes her hand and wipes it on the dog. Frustrated, Annie exclaims, "give them back their child and dog, both housebroken, everyone's satisfied." Annie wants to teach Helen "everything the earth is full of." She wonders aloud how she can teach Helen what meaning is—that "N-A-P-K-I-N" means napkin, for example.

*Annie refuses to give up, even when the outlook is poor, because she desperately wants to teach Helen about the world she has been so cut-off from until now. It is not enough to show Helen how to be neat and orderly; Annie wants to show Helen how to think and write, in a sense "freeing" Helen from her own ignorance about the world.*

Meanwhile, figures gather outside the garden house. As the bell tolls six, James, Viney, Percy, and Martha enter the garden house and remove Annie and Helen's things, bringing them back to the house. James takes Annie's suitcase, and studies Annie "without mockery."

*Over the course of the last two acts, James has developed a grudging respect for Annie. In contrast to his own cynicism and laziness, Annie refuses to give up, and in this way she serves as an inspiration for James, who struggles himself to find the courage to stand up to the world.*

Kate comes to the garden house. Annie, seeing Kate, touches Helen's hand to Kate's cheek and spells, "mother." Kate, impatient, cries out, "let her *come*!" Repeating Helen's name, Kate kisses her daughter and carries her like a baby back to the house.

*Kate wants to educate her daughter, but she seems more concerned with loving her daughter and expressing this love than she is with showing her the kind of discipline that might actually help her learn. As the passage establishes, Kate's love for Helen can be smothering—it precludes Helen from learning and becoming a thinking, autonomous person.*

Now alone in the garden house, Annie hears a boy's voice saying, "You said we'd be together, forever and ever." These words repeat, louder and louder, until Annie covers her ears to drown them out.

*Annie is afraid that she has "failed" with Helen. This failure is devastating for her, since it reminds her of Jimmie, whose death she seems to blame herself for.*

Just then, Arthur Keller enters the garden house and gives Annie her first months' salary. He thanks Annie for changing Helen from a "wild thing" into a child. But Annie protests that she wants to teach Helen how to think, not merely behave. She begs Arthur not to spoil Helen, noting, "The world isn't an easy place for anyone."

*Annie reiterates two important points about education. First, language is the "light" of the mind—without it, it's impossible to think precisely. Second, it's best to exercise little to no pity while raising a child, since, sooner or later, the child is going to have to learn to survive without the pity of others.*

Back in the house, Helen feels the front door and removes the **key** from the lock. She runs to Kate, who takes the keys back from her. James walks into the house while, outside, Viney pumps **water** from the water pump. At supper, James says grace, quoting from the Biblical story of Jacob wrestling with the angel.

*It's no coincidence that James mentions the story of Jacob. In this story, Jacob wrestles with a mysterious stranger who turns out to be an angel, and is later blessed with the name "Israel." The story is often interpreted as a symbol of the struggle to follow God, and of the blessings that sometimes emerge from the struggle. In this way, the story parallels the relationship between Annie and Helen: out of their struggle, a miracle will emerge.*

At the supper table, Helen throws her napkin to the floor. Annie puts the napkin back on Helen's lap, and when Helen throws it away again, Annie takes away Helen's food. Aunt Ev objects that Helen is only a child, but Annie shoots back that Helen is testing her family to see what she can get away with. Arthur tells Annie that she's causing a nuisance by being so hard on Helen, and orders Annie to bring Helen her plate. Annie does so, fuming.

*Here, the weakness of the Kellers' attitude toward Helen is painfully clear. Aunt Ev is superficially kind to Helen, but her kindness prevents Helen from learning or growing: Ev is willing to overlook everything Helen does, and this means Helen never has any incentive to improve her behavior. The Kellers shower Helen in kindness, but in the long run this could, paradoxically, be considered cruel. Conversely, Annie is tough on Helen, but in the long run her actions are kind.*

Helen gleefully throws her fork to the floor. Wearily, James says, "I think we've started all over." Helen finds a pitcher of **water** and swings it in Annie's direction, getting water all over Annie's dress. Annie stands up and carries Helen out of the room, ordering Arthur, who has stood up angrily, to remain seated. Aunt Ev is astounded that Arthur would let Annie speak to him this way. But James agrees with Annie, telling Arthur, "has it never occurred to you that on one occasion you might be consummately wrong?" There's a long silence, and Arthur, staring directly at James, sits down.

*James finally stands up to his father—and, per Kate's advice, the world. Instead of hiding behind sarcasm and cheap jokes, he tells his father exactly what's on his mind: he doesn't agree with Arthur's opinion about Annie. The experience of being directly defied is, apparently, so unfamiliar to Arthur that he's momentarily stunned. But perhaps the fact that he complies with James suggests that, in the future, he'll do a better job of remaining humble and listening to other people's opinions, especially his son's.*

Outside, Annie leads Helen to the **water** pump, still holding the pitcher. She touches Helen's hand to the handle of the pump. Helen pumps until water comes out, filling the pitcher. Annie holds Helen's hand under the water. Then, she spells "water" for Helen. And at this point, "a miracle happens." Helen says, "wah wah."

*This is the titular miracle of the play: Helen finally draws a connection between actual water and symbol for water. She intuits what meaning* means. *This is nothing short of a second birth for Helen—as evidenced by the fact that she repeats the word she uttered when she was six months old. Thanks to Annie's teaching, she's been baptized and born again (which also explains all the water symbolism).*

Helen seems suddenly excited. She touches the earth and then holds out her hand expectantly—Annie spells "ground." She does the same with the pump, the steps of the porch, and the trellis. Annie calls for the Kellers to run outside. When Kate and Arthur rush outside, Annie guides Helen toward each one of her parents and then makes the signs for "mother" and "papa." Annie cries, "She *knows*!"

*Helen clearly understands the concept of meaning. Language, she now realizes, is a way of understanding the world around her—everything has its own special sign, and to learn the signs is to learn about the world itself.*

Helen turns to Annie and grasps Annie's thigh. Annie makes the sign for "teacher" and Helen repeats it back to her. Helen then turns back to her mother. She taps Kate's pocket until Kate retrieves the **keys** and gives them to Helen. It is their first act of communication, and in this moment, Kate both gains and loses her daughter. Then, Helen spells the word "teacher" on Kate's hand. Kate embraces Helen for a moment, but then "relinquishes her." Helen feels her way back into the yard, where she finds Annie. Helen presents Annie with the keys. Annie holds Helen in her arms, and Helen kisses her cheek. Kate watches, torn, and then turns back toward the dinner table.

*In this poignant moment, Helen communicates with her mother for the first time. And yet, the content of this communication ("teacher," rather than "mother") seems to suggest that Helen has come to think of Annie as even more of a maternal figure than Kate. And this is what Gibson means when he says that Kate gains and loses her daughter. Kate is overjoyed with Helen's progress, but she senses that Helen will always think of Annie, not Kate, as the person who "birthed" her. Before Helen could communicate, Helen was Kate's child, and hers alone. Now that Helen can "speak," Kate has lost her grip over her child, and this is at once happy and sad.*

Annie takes Helen's hand and spells out, "I love Helen … forever and ever." The lights dim, "taking on the color of the past." But this time, there are no echoing voices. Very slowly, Kate sits down to the table, joining James and Arthur. Aunt Ev gets up to open the door, and Annie, holding Helen in her arms, walks up the porch steps and through the door to the Kellers' house.

*The nostalgic lighting signifies that, by teaching Helen, Annie has finally overcome her personal demons. Jimmie no longer haunts Annie. She has redeemed herself by "saving" another young child—Helen. In the act of teaching Helen, Annie has come to love Helen, and the reverse is also true—they're as close as a mother and daughter, and in some ways closer. Annie has freed Helen from her own ignorance. And, in a way, she has freed Helen from total dependence on her family. Helen is free to explore the world and have her own independent life—and indeed, Helen will go on to become a great political activist and one of the most famous figures in American history.*

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