

Heroes in Literature and In the Real World

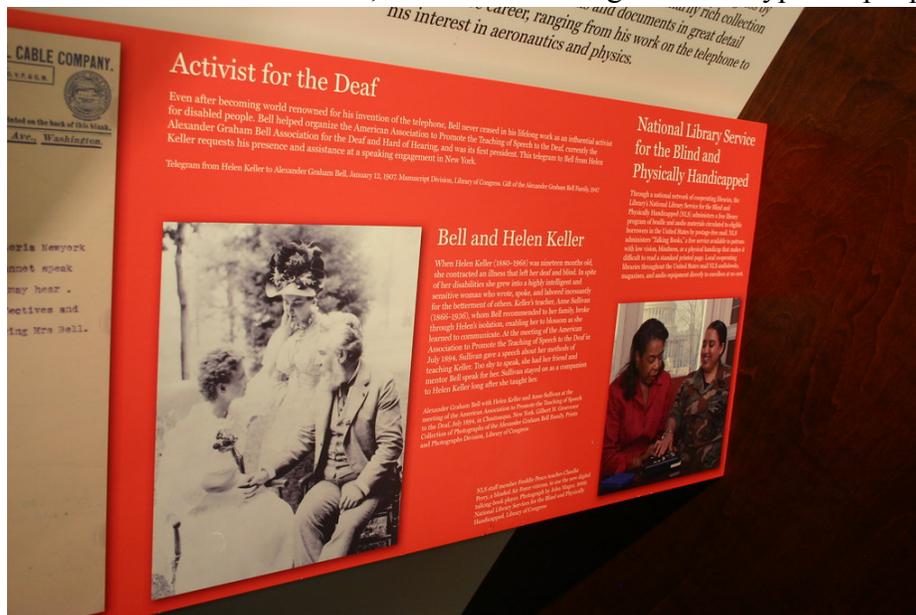
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Helen Keller

What makes Helen a hero: Helen overcame disabilities that she was born with to succeed in life. She was a social activist, who demanded rights for all types of people.



Notes

Summary of Helen's life: Helen Keller was born in Tuscumbia, Alabama to reasonably affluent parents in June 1880. Her father was a newspaper editor and her mother a homemaker. At birth she had no disabilities. Healthy and precocious until nineteen months when she suffered a terrible illness, which her doctor diagnosed as “acute congestion of the stomach and brain,” or “brain fever.” The disease was most likely either scarlet fever, the scourge of children in the nineteenth century, or meningitis. When the fever broke, it was discovered that she was both blind and deaf.



Confined in the silent darkness of what she later called “no-world,” Helen became increasingly frustrated and had violent temper tantrums in which she would kick and scream like a wild animal. Despite her disabilities, Helen was a strong and vigorous seven-year-old when she first met Annie Sullivan. The meeting gives clear evidence of Helen’s violent temper. Helen and her mother awaited Annie’s arrival on their porch; Helen full of curiosity could sense that something unexpected and interesting was happening. At Annie’s approach, Helen took hold of her bag, and her mother tried to take the bag from her. Annie wrote in her description of the scene “the child paid no attention to these signs. Whereupon her mother forcibly took the bag from her. Helen’s face grew red to the roots of her hair, and she began to clutch at her mother’s dress and kick violently.” (xi) Annie was to lose two teeth from Helen’s blows before she at last gained control of her and gradually led her out of the darkness. Because she could neither hear people speak nor see their mouths move, Helen did not learn language as a seeing, hearing child would. But in the terrible darkness was an active brain. Although Helen had developed her own system of simple signs: a shake of the head for no; a nod for yes, but, most important the signal for wanting her mother, a stroke of her own cheek, that system was inadequate to express her complex thoughts and feelings. Her violence was born of her frustration at not being able to understand others, nor express herself.

Annie came to the rescue of the Kellers by a rather curious route. When Helen’s violence became a threat to her newborn baby sister, Mildred, everybody began to pressure her parents to put her in an institution. By chance, Kate Keller had read a book by Charles Dickens describing his experiences on his visit to America, *American Notes*. In it Dickens wrote about visiting the Perkins Institution, a school for the blind in Boston. There he met Laura Bridgeman, who like Helen had become blind and deaf as a child. Laura Bridgeman had been taught by Dr Samuel Gridley Howe, a respected teacher of the blind. Dr Howe had devised a system of communication for the deaf, a system in which each letter of the alphabet was shown by a hand sign. Howe adapted that system for Laura Bridgeman into a *manual* system that allowed her to *feel* the hand signs. Once Laura had mastered that system, she was able to communicate; she had escaped her dark, isolated world. Kate Kellerman, reading Dickens' account, Asked herself “why not that system for Helen?” Feeling more hopeful, the Kellers took Helen to an eye doctor in Baltimore. Though he admitted that he could do nothing to restore Helen’s sight, he advised the Kellers to





consult the famous inventor, Alexander Graham Bell, who was also an expert on teaching speech to the deaf.

Helen loved Alexander Graham Bell. He was kind and tender and the two became friends, for Bell could easily understand many of the small signs Helen had created for herself to communicate. It was Bell who advised Helen's father to ask Michael Anagnos, director of the Perkins Institution to send a teacher for Helen. And what a teacher he sent! Annie Sullivan was only twenty-one years old when she came to teach Helen. In early childhood she had developed itching eyes; her loving family was extremely poor and could not readily consult a doctor. Two years later, when little could be done to help Annie, she was finally taken to a doctor, who diagnosed her condition as trachoma, a viral disease that left her half-blind. After the death of her parents, Annie and her brother were sent to a Massachusetts "poor house," the Tewksbury Alms House., where they were the only children. They lived in the women's ward among prostitutes and very old women. When her brother died there, Annie was left alone. Then, miraculously, one day a group of visitors, prospective donors, came to the Alms House. Among them was Frank B. Sanborn, who was connected with the Perkins School for the Blind. Someone had told Annie about the existence of the school, so, pitifully, she went from visitor to visitor, saying, "Please send me to school." Moved by her plea Sanborn stopped and asked her, "How long have you been here?" But Annie was forced to admit that she really did not know. At age fourteen Annie could neither read nor write, add or subtract. The day that she entered the Perkins School, she always said, was the real beginning of her life. She was an extremely fast learner. Very soon she learned to read Braille, and in a short time she was teaching the other students.

But Annie had a temper and stubbornness quite the match of Helen Keller's. Then understanding that Annie's bad behavior was simply the result of ignorance and long neglect, a teacher at the school tackled the problem of Annie's temper. She taught her studies, but she also taught her good manners. Annie began to mimic her teacher, to speak softly and show kindness. Her progress in learning and making friends quickly accelerated. Once she became a brilliant student, she became a kindly teacher of other students. She graduated from Perkins as valedictorian. Worried now about how she was going to support herself, she was saved by a letter from Mr. Anagnos enclosing the Keller's letter to him seeking a teacher for Helen. And that was how the two heroic antagonists, Helen and Annie, came to meet, to do battle, to struggle and, at last, to become loving, inseparable companions. It is a very good thing that Annie was physically and mentally strong because her first weeks with Helen were extremely difficult. Annie persisted in "writing" in Helen's hand, until very, very slowly there were glimmerings that Helen was making a connection between the fluttering in her hand and the object offered to her. But before Helen was prepared to learn, she had to be tamed. The most striking example of Annie's method of teaching her occurred a few weeks after she arrived at the Keller home. Helen's way of eating was to pick up the food on her plate with her hands and cram it into her mouth. When she finished her own food, she would circle the table and take whatever smelled good off the plates of the others. At breakfast one morning, making her rounds from plate to plate, she smelled sausage on Annie's plate and darted out to grab it. Annie's hand came down on Helen's.



Helen began to howl and try to take her hand away. Helen's mother and father begged Annie to give Helen what she wanted; Annie refused.

She told the Kellers to leave the room if they could not bear to watch Annie's method of teaching Helen self-control. They did, and Annie locked the door behind them. Helen tried again, and after throwing a wild tantrum, went from chair to chair. When she found that she was alone with Helen, she raced to the door, but it was locked. Annie went back to finish her breakfast and Helen went back to pushing food into her mouth with her fingers. When Annie put a spoon in her hand, she threw the spoon down to the floor, whereupon Annie wrestled Helen to the floor and forced her to pick up the spoon. Helen finally gave in and finished her breakfast using the spoon. Then Annie wanted Helen to fold her napkin. Helen refused and threw the napkin on the floor. Again, Annie wrestled the child to the floor to pick up the napkin, whereupon Helen had another, more violent tantrum, kicking and screaming. After a whole hour of battle, Helen submitted to Annie's will. At that Annie opened the door and let her free. An exhausted Annie went up to her room and wept, convinced that this job was too difficult for her. Helen's parents, out of their great love for the child, had bowed to her every wish. As long as her parents were in the room, Annie could never succeed in disciplining Helen. As she later wrote, "obedience is the gateway through which knowledge and love enter the mind of a child." (Garrett, 36) When Annie went to the Kellers and prepared to resign, she explained her reasoning. Then Captain Keller found a solution. There was a small cottage on the property. He would refurbish it and furnish it and Helen and Annie would live there together. He and his wife would visit every day, but Annie would have complete control of the education, including civilization, of Helen. We all remember the unforgettable scene in *The Miracle Worker* when Annie pumps water out of the well, and then held Helen's hand under the water while spelling out the word "water" in her other hand. This moving scene was completely accurate. The first major breakthrough in the education of Helen Keller occurred in just this way. Helen's miraculous leap out of darkness was in learning to associate the feel of water on her hand with the movements Annie was making on her other hand—and then trying to sound the word "water"—"wa wa" which she had retained from babyhood, before her terrible illness robbed her of speech.



From that moment Helen Keller soared to heights of learning that would eventually take her as a student to Radcliffe. From walking around a room touching every object and learning its name to—only a few months after Annie's arrival—"reading" the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Helen was unstoppable. When Annie needed to take a rest after "talking" into Helen's hand the whole day, Helen herself would "write" in her own hand. Language came to be her passion. In her first year with Annie, Helen learned to spell 900 words and to write letters. She wrote by placing a paper over a grooved writing board and moving her pencil within each square to make a letter. At age eight, she began to keep a journal, a practice she continued all her life. Annie had kept in constant communication with Dr. Anagnos of



the Perkins school, and she took Helen there for a visit. She considered it important for Helen to venture out into the world. The school had resources that the Kellers did not have, like raised print and Braille. But for Helen the greatest gift that the school offered her was the opportunity to be with other children: “What joy,” she later wrote, “to talk with other children in my own language.” In 1889 Helen was invited to be a full-time guest at the school. There she read well above her “grade level.”

Because she had an uncanny “knack” for learning languages, Helen learned French, German, and Latin. When she was ten, Helen took the final step in her journey to full emergence from darkness. She learned to speak. Annie took Helen to meet Sarah Fuller, Principal of the Horace Mann School for the Deaf. Ms. Fuller taught Helen to speak by placing her hand on her own mouth and then her throat, so that Helen could feel the vibrations of sound issuing from Ms. Fuller’s mouth as she spoke. Then Helen, feeling her own lips, mouth, and throat, would try to imitate the sounds the teacher made. Helen’s first spoken sentence was, “It is too warm.” From that beginning she went on to be a very impressive speaker, able to give speeches before large audiences. Mr. Anagnos, proud as he was of Annie’s and Helen’s accomplishments, widely published news of the “miracle child,” and Helen soon became a celebrity. Her celebrity status was in some ways a blessing, because she could publicly speak on behalf of the blind and deaf, as well as the poor and oppressed. But it was, as well, something of an obstacle to her progress, because people treated her as a “phenomenon.” Nevertheless, conquering all the obstacles thrown before her—including one of the cruelest, which was the rumor that Annie was the brilliant one and Helen was only repeating what her teacher told her—Helen gained entrance to The Cambridge School for Young Ladies, a prep school deigned to prepare women for entrance into Radcliffe.

Finally, she arrived at the place toward which she yearned, Radcliffe College. While she was in college Helen took all the exams and wrote all the papers—on a Braille-writer—that were required of other, seeing and hearing—girls. She graduated with honors. Helen Keller always used her learning and her gifts for writing and speaking to champion the cause of anyone in need of help” the poor, the oppressed, the uneducated. Her major life’s work was campaigning on behalf of the blind, because she believed (and could support with scientific evidence) that most blindness was the result of poverty—poor living conditions, poor nutrition and no access to medical care. She tirelessly wrote pamphlets and spoke before audiences. She spoke personally with President Franklin Delano and Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, and finally even addressed the UN on behalf of the physically or politically oppressed. And always her plea was the same: the rich and powerful are obliged to aid the poor, powerless, and voiceless. Helen Keller was a great hero because rather than simply resting in the joy of her own escape from darkness, she made her first concern the welfare of others. Annie Sullivan is a hero because she led Helen out of darkness and helped her to become the great woman she was. Against all odds, Annie Sullivan, the miracle worker, made the hero Helen Keller.

Helen’s success: Helen Keller first published her autobiography in 1903; the book revealed Helen Keller’s astonishing life to the age of twenty-two. In the years from that time Keller



became a well-published writer and a very powerful and persuasive social activist. She not only championed the cause of the blind, but in 1909, she became a member of the Socialist Party because she believed that “most blindness was the result of poverty—poor living conditions, lack of nutrition. No access to proper medical care.” [Garrett, 94] However, she was not just an advocate for those suffering from blindness, only *one* of her many, complex disabilities, she was active in the suffrage movement; she fought bravely for fair pay and job security for workers; and she wrote numerous articles about racial inequality, child labor, and unfair working conditions. She went so far as to speak before the Industrial Workers of the World, the “Wobblies”. She supported this union and its radical ideas and spoke out against the government’s persecution of them--a very bold speech, especially given in wartime. [The Second World War]. Fearlessly, she challenged world leaders, including Franklin Delano Roosevelt. She died in 1968, and throughout her quite unexpectedly long life, she devoted herself to the causes of all those suffering from oppression of any kind. However, as incredibly inspiring as the achievements of Helen Keller were, this book and every other that she wrote makes clear that in celebrating Helen Keller, we must also acknowledge her “teacher” [as she always called her] Annie Sullivan. The *Story* of Helen Keller, then, presents us with *two unique heroes*.



References

By Helen Keller

1902, *The Story of My Life*

1909, *The World I Live in and Optimism: A collection of Essays*

1910, *The Song of the Stone Wall*

1927, *Light in my Darkness*

1935, *How I would Help the World*

1955, *Teacher: Anne Sullivan Macy*

1967, *Her Socialist Years*

2017, *The Story of My Life*





2020, The Story of a Life

Discussion Questions:

1. Have your students cover their eyes with blindfolds and ask them to be “blind” for two hours. Have them first negotiate the classroom with which they are familiar first. Then have them leave the classroom and walk around the halls for a short period of time when other students have been released from their classes. Finally, blindfolds removed, ask them to write essays on their experiences as a “blind” person.
2. Ask your students, “What have your experiences been with blind people? If you see a blind person walking in the street, is your impulse to take hold of his/her arm and try to guide him?” Then ask them to consider how the blind person whom they have assisted might feel about being helped.
3. What are your students’ reactions to the quite abusive Annie Sullivan? Even though they approve of what she was able to do, do they like her?
4. Is the initial reaction of the Kellers to their so terribly afflicted child—absolutely bowing to her wishes-- understandable. Do you think you would have behaved as they did?
5. Would Helen Keller’s life have been fuller if she had lived with a family—if not a husband and child of her own, then perhaps with siblings as a favorite aunt—rather than spending all her life in promoting the cause of the poor and disabled, whom she did not personally know?
6. Have your students do a computer search on the present status of the blind and the blind-deaf both in the industrialized world and in the so-called “third world.” Have them write charts of their findings. Are there societies in which the blind-deaf are thought to bring bad luck and are therefore either marginalized or driven out?
7. “Pro-life” advocates should find a very powerful case to argue in the story of Helen Keller. Have any done so?
8. If you knew, from pre-natal tests, that your child would be handicapped as Helen Keller was, would you want to terminate the pregnancy?

