

The Miracle Worker

By William Gibson

“The point? That there's always hope. Such a trite, over-used message in a world full of trite, over-used messages, but true nonetheless. "The Miracle Worker" is not trite, not syrupy, not maudlin, not melodramatic. It is powerful and touching, and genuinely inspiring. You won't see a better play for a very long time.” –Eric D. Snider

(Taken from: <http://www.ericdsnider.com/theater/the-miracle-worker-1/>)

Which KERA Academic Expectations
relate to our program?

1.3, 1.4, 2.16, 2.20, 2.23, 2.24, 2.25, 2.26, 6.2



The Kentucky Arts Council, the state arts agency, supports Kentucky Repertory Theatre with state tax dollars and federal funding from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Synopsis

The play *The Miracle Worker* opens with a doctor assuring Captain Keller and his wife, Kate, that their infant daughter, Helen, will recover from a serious fever. Soon after the doctor leaves, however, Kate realizes that Helen is deaf and blind. In the next scene, Helen is about six years old. She is a wild, undisciplined child. Though they try, her parents are unable to help or control her. In desperation they hire a young woman, Annie Sullivan.

From the moment Annie arrives, it is clear that she and Helen will be gripped in a great struggle. But Helen is not the only problem for Annie. Annie must also convince the Kellers, especially the Captain, that she, Annie, needs complete control of Helen if she is to reach the child. Annie is certain that language is the key to gaining access to Helen's mind, and she constantly spells the names of things on Helen's palm.

Although Helen can spell them back on Annie's palm, the understanding that the words represent things eludes her. After spending two weeks together in the garden house, Helen finally obeys Annie, but when the time is up and they return to the family, Helen quickly reverts to her former behavior. The Keller's are indulgent, ready to fall back in their old pattern of behavior, but Annie doesn't let them. When Helen spills a water pitcher on Annie, Annie takes her out to refill it. She spells "water" into Helen's hand, and suddenly the miracle happens. Helen understands.

(Taken from <http://www.teachervision.fen.com/biography/resource/9357.html>)

The Kentucky Repertory Theatre's Stage

These different types of performance space are most common in the theatre:

- The Proscenium Stage is the most common. The play is performed within a frame. The frame is called a proscenium arch; the audience looks through this frame as if the performance was a picture.
- The Thrust Stage extends into the audience. Spectators sit on three sides.
- Theatre-in-the-Round (or arena) has the audience sitting all around the stage. The actions take place on a platform in the center of the room.

After seeing **A Miracle Worker**, what type of stage do you think Kentucky Repertory Theatre has?

William Gibson

William Gibson was born in the Bronx, New York, on November 13, 1914, the son of George Irving, a bank clerk, and Florence (Dore) Gibson. Gibson spent his childhood in New York City and eventually attended the City College of New York, where he studied from 1930 until 1932. After graduation, Gibson moved to Kansas, supporting himself as a piano teacher while pursuing his interest in theatre. It was in Topeka, Kansas, that Gibson had his earliest plays produced. Most of these early works were light comedies; two of them were later revised and restaged: *A Cry of the Players* and *Dinny and the Witches*, both in 1948. Shortly after his time in Kansas, Gibson met a psychoanalyst named Margaret Brenman; the two were married on September 6, 1940, and eventually had two sons, Thomas and David.

Gibson's first major critical and popular success in New York was *Two for The Seesaw*, which opened on Broadway in 1958. He was praised for the play's brisk dialogue and the compassion with which he endowed the characters. However, it is Gibson's second Broadway production, *The Miracle Worker*, for which he is best known.

Gibson first became fascinated with Annie Sullivan and her triumph as Helen Keller's teacher while reading the letters that Annie Sullivan wrote in 1887 describing her experiences in the Keller household. It was these letters and also Nella Brady's biography, *Annie Sullivan Macy*, that inspired Gibson to write about Annie Sullivan's accomplishments. Gibson first attempted to write *The Miracle Worker* as a solo dance piece but wrote it as a television play for the series *Playhouse 90*, which was produced by CBS. After *The Miracle Worker* was warmly received when it aired on CBS on February 7, 1957, Gibson received offers to adapt it for stage and film. He decided to write it for the stage because he wished to have more artistic control over the production. Although it opened to mixed reviews, positive press and word-of-mouth led to *The Miracle Worker's* success on Broadway.

The Miracle Worker was adapted as a feature-length film starring Anne Bancroft as Annie and Patty Duke as Helen in 1962, and was again produced for television in 1979 with Patty Duke playing the role of Annie and Melissa Gilbert as Helen. After *The Miracle Worker*, Gibson continued to write for the theatre and became a member of the Dramatists Guild. However, after [Golden Boy](#) (1964), which was a musical adaptation of Clifford Odets's play of the same name, Gibson largely withdrew from the New York theatre scene. It was during this time in the 1960s and 1970s that he founded and became president of the Berkshire Theatre Festival in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Gibson did return to the New York stage, however, during the 1980s; *The Monday after the Miracle*, his sequel to *The Miracle Worker* opened on Broadway on December 14, 1982, at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre. *The Monday after The Miracle* was a much darker piece than its predecessor and garnered poor reviews and attendance; it closed after a short run. *The Miracle Worker* continues to be Gibson's best known work and is the drama on which his reputation rests.

Characters in The Miracle Worker

Helen Keller – daughter of Captain Arthur Keller and Kate Keller. At six-and-half years old came down with scarlet fever and became blind and deaf.

Annie Sullivan – the actual “miracle worker”. She is Helen’s teacher and moves into their garden house with Helen so she can teach her first obedience and second to communicate.

Captain Arthur Sullivan – Helen’s father.

Kate Keller – Helen’s mother

James Keller – Captain Keller’s son from a previous marriage.

Anagnos – Annie’s counselor at the Perkins Institution for the Blind.

Aunt Ev – Connects the Keller family with the Perkins Institute but is a very intrusive woman.

Martha – a young African American child that is very bossy towards the other children. She is however, quite terrified of Helen’s behavior.

Percy – a young African American child who is younger than Martha. He is also frightened of Helen, but becomes directly involved with helping Helen’s education while he is staying in the garden house with Annie and Helen.

Offstage Voices – These voices are always directed toward Annie and her internal struggles. One of the most common voices is a boy’s voice that represents Annie’s dead brother Jimmie whose death she blames on herself. This voice, along with the others, represents Annie's internal struggle with feelings of guilt, her motivation to succeed with Helen, and her will to continue living her own life.

Viney – an African American woman who is the Keller’s servant. She loves all the Keller children very much and is very protective of them.

(Taken from <http://teacherweb.com/ny/johnjay/mace/ap8.stm>)

Annie Sullivan

Annie Sullivan is the "miracle worker" to which the title of the play refers. She first appears while she is still at the Perkins Institution for the Blind, where she has lived as a pupil since she was a child. Everything that she has learned, including the sign language that she later uses with Helen, she has learned at Perkins. When Anagnos asks her to become Helen's governess, as requested by the Keller family, it is her first job. At the age of twenty, Annie takes her first step out of the Perkins Institution and into her adult life. From the first moment that she enters the Keller household, Annie is met with skepticism and doubt, mostly because of her young age and lack of experience. This, however, does not deter her from what she feels must be done. When Annie and Helen first meet, Helen is a spoiled child who, because of her family's pity, is allowed to do whatever she pleases. Annie's first challenge is simply to get her to respond to discipline. After that, her time is devoted to teaching Helen hand symbols in the hope that she will eventually connect them with the objects and people around her, and thus learn "language."

The other characters in the play also offer their own challenges to Annie. Captain Keller almost fires Annie because of what he calls her "Yankee" attitude, and they are constantly at odds with each other over the way that she treats Helen. It is only through clever manipulation that Annie is able to bide time until she can successfully prove herself to him. James Keller, in his usual sarcastic way, finds Annie's methods laughable at first, but he is eventually won over. Kate Keller also meets Annie with skepticism, but she is in such pain over Helen's condition that she is willing to let Annie have whatever she needs in order for Helen to have a better life.

The character who has the most direct effect on Annie throughout the play, however, is her own conscience, represented by the Offstage Voices. These voices represent Annie's past experiences and give her the motivation that she needs to succeed with Helen, Alone; these voices present the only direct threat to Annie's confidence and strong will. The most powerful of them all is the voice of her younger brother, Jimmie, whose death Annie blames on herself. Annie is not able to silence his voice until the end of the play, when the "miracle" finally happens and she clutches Helen to her promising to love her "forever and ever," just as she once promised Jimmie.

(Taken from: <http://teacherweb.com/ny/johnjay/mace/ap8.stm>)

Helen Keller

Helen Adams Keller was born in Tuscumbia, Alabama, on June 27, 1880. Her parents were Captain Arthur H. Keller and Katherine Adams Keller. Her father was a veteran of the confederate army and the editor of the local newspaper. Helen was born a normal child; she started speaking when she was about six months old. By the time she was a year old, she was able to communicate with her parents and she had also learned to walk. When Helen was 18 months old, an illness developed that the doctor described as brain congestion. She ran a high fever for several days, and then the fever was gone. Helen was left deaf and blind from the illness. She became a very wild, unruly child. She would scream and kick when she was angry and giggle and laugh when happy. She developed many of her own signals to communicate her needs with her parents.

When Helen was 6, her mother contacted Dr. Alexander Graham Bell, whom she had heard was working on devices to help the deaf. Bell met with Helen and her parents and suggested that they contact the Perkins Institute for the Blind in Boston, Massachusetts. In March 1887 Annie Sullivan, a teacher at the institute, came to serve as Helen's teacher. One month after her arrival, Sullivan had taught Keller the word "water." She did this by using her fingers to spell letters into Helen's hand. From this she understood that objects had names, and that her teacher spelled these names into her hand. Annie Sullivan was with Helen day and night, constantly spelling into her hand the words and ideas of things going on around them. Helen was a quick learner. In 3 years she learned sign language, the Braille alphabet, and she could read and write.

Helen wanted to learn to speak, and in 1890 she began taking speech classes at the Horace Mann School for the Deaf in Boston. After 25 years of hard work and practice, Helen was able to speak in a voice that others could understand. From 1894 to 1896 Helen attended the Wright-Humason School for the Deaf. Here she continued to work on improving her communication, as well as her math, French, German, and geography. Helen went on to Cambridge School for Young Ladies. Annie Sullivan attended every class with Helen and interpreted the lectures and books for her, as they were not in Braille. By the time she was 16, she had passed the admissions examinations for Radcliffe College; in 1904 she graduated. This was all done with the assistance of Annie Sullivan interpreting the lectures and texts.

(Taken from: <http://www.notablebiographies.com/Jo-Ki/Keller-Helen.html>)

The Miracle Worker: Questions to Consider

1. Before Annie's arrival, how did Helen's disabilities and behavior affect the Keller family? Be specific in discussing the Captain, Kate, and James.
2. Describe Annie Sullivan. What kind of young woman was she? Cite examples from the play to support your views.
3. Describe Captain Keller and Kate. Why do you think they had so much trouble controlling Helen?
4. How do you think Annie's background, especially her memories of her younger brother, Jimmie, influenced her behavior as an adult? Explain.
5. What are James's and Aunt Ev's roles in the story? Why do you think the author included them?
6. Why wouldn't Annie let Helen take food from her (Annie's) plate? Why was Annie's battle with Helen at the table so important?
7. Why was it necessary for Helen to be completely dependent on Annie during her learning? What was the Captain's reaction to Annie's demand that she stay alone with Helen at the garden house? Why do you think he finally gave in?
8. When Helen and Annie returned from the garden house, why do you think Helen "tested" Annie and her parents at the table? What happened? In your opinion, was Annie right?
9. Why do you think "water," "wah, wah," was the first word Helen recognized?
10. The characters undergo profound changes by the end of the play. Explain how Helen, Annie, the Captain, and James changed.
11. What did Annie and Helen fight about for the first time in the play?
12. What happened at the institution where Annie grew up that she says made her so strong?

Questions (cont.)

13. Describe the relationship between James and Captain Keller. What reasons can you name that might have caused them to behave this way?
14. How do Annie and Helen feel about each other by the end of the play? And how is this made clear?
15. How does Annie think Helen can come out of her shell like a chick? Annie compares words to what? In what matter does Kate advise her about James?
16. In the play, what do the girls at the institution give to Annie as a going-away present?
17. In the play, who are Annie's antagonists throughout her life?
18. Upon her arrival, Annie takes little time before she antagonizes Captain Keller in "The Miracle Worker". What does she do?
19. What does it mean when Helen moves her hand across her cheek?
20. How does Helen communicate with Martha and Percy? How do they treat her?
21. In the *Miracle Worker*, do you think Helen's worst handicap is deafness or blindness?
22. What is the climax to the play?

Excerpted from *English Teacher's Great Books Activities Kit*.

(Taken from: <http://www.teachervision.fen.com/biography/resource/9358.html?detoured=1> and <http://www.enotes.com/miracle-worker/q-and-a>)

The Miracle Worker: Project Ideas

1. Research Helen Keller. Write a biographical sketch of this truly remarkable woman. Include her achievements and triumphs.
2. Write an additional scene for the play. What happens after Helen begins to understand words? Create a scene that shows how Annie continues to teach Helen. With the help of classmates, act out and dramatize your scene.
3. Toward the end of the play, Annie says to Kate, "We're born to use words..." With your group, discuss the importance of language. Brainstorm how different life would be without language. Appoint a recorder for your group to write down your ideas, and then discuss your ideas with the members of another group.

4. Research Annie Sullivan and present an oral report about her to your class. Include her background, her education, and her accomplishments.
5. Before Annie came to the Keller house, Helen was wild and undisciplined. Her parents seemed unable to control her. Organize a panel to discuss this question: How important is parental discipline and guidance to children? Support your opinions with examples from the play as well as from your own experiences.
6. Louis Braille created a method by which blind people can read. Research the Braille method. How does it work? Obtain a book or magazine written in Braille and see if you can read it through touch.

Curriculum Connections

1. Research the cause of Helen Keller's blindness and deafness. Could her disabilities have been prevented using modern treatments and drugs? (Science)
2. Annie suffered from trachoma. Research this affliction. What causes it? How can it be treated? (Science)
3. Many researchers are concerned that listening to loud music too often might cause hearing loss or eventual deafness. Research this question and present your findings orally to your class or group. (Science)

(Taken from: <http://www.teachervision.fen.com/biography/resource/9359.html?detoured=1>)

Activities

Activity 1:

Have everyone get a partner. Once all partners are chosen give each group a blindfold and a pair of ear plugs. (You can also use ear muffs, but preferably ear plugs because it makes it harder to hear). Each team needs to decide who will play "Helen" and who will play "Annie". Once decided the person playing Helen needs to put in the ear plugs and be blindfolded. Then the person playing Annie needs to try and direct their partner around the room without them bumping into anything or falling down. Also the person

playing Annie is not allowed to talk. Once they have finished they can switch and the other person can play Helen.

Activity 2:

Everyone will need a partner. Once again they will need ear plugs and a blindfold. One person will be blindfolded and have their ears plugged. At the front of the room, the teacher needs to have a few objects to show the people who are not blindfolded. One at a time the teacher will hold up the object and the person playing Annie will write or draw the object with their finger in the hand of the person playing Helen. The person playing Helen will then try to figure out what the other person is drawing in their hand. The people playing Helen should be the only ones talking. You can then switch and the other partner can be blindfolded.

Theatre Etiquette

Theatre is a unique experience that involves many disciplines coming together. The audience is an important part of this experience; its presence and participation as the action unfolds are what makes theatre meaningful and exciting. Here are a few tips to help you make the most of your visit to Kentucky Repertory Theatre at Horse Cave:

- **Be excited!! The theatre is a magical place where your imagination can soar. Without the audience, there is no theatre.**
- **The ushers will greet you as you arrive and advise what to do before taking you to your seats. Please listen very carefully and follow their instructions. When being escorted to your seats please file into the auditorium quickly and quietly, so that the performance can begin on time.**

- **Whispering and talking during the performances makes it difficult for the performers to do their job. It can also be distracting to other audience members. Natural responses such as laughter and applause, however, are part of the theatre experience and are certainly most welcome.**
- **Please use restrooms before the performances, during intermission and after the performance only. Do not leave the auditorium unless it is absolutely unavoidable.**
- **Please do not eat, drink, smoke, or chew gum in the auditoriums.**
- **Pagers, cameras, radios, cellular phones, recorders and any other electronic devices are not permitted in the auditorium. If you bring any of these items with you, you must leave them at the box office.**
- **Remember, this performance is the actor's job. They have rehearsed and prepared for many long hours and are excited to be performing for you. Please respect their work.**
- **Applause at the end of the show is the audience's way of saying, "Thank you, we enjoyed the show." This makes the actors' many long hours preparation worthwhile. Applause at the beginning of intermission is also a nice gesture of appreciation.**

Kentucky Repertory Theatre at Horse Cave Behavior Policy

- 1) Make every effort to bring a minimum of one adult chaperone for every 15 students. If you do not have a minimum numbers of chaperones please inform the Kentucky Repertory Theatre at Horse Cave.
- 2) Please remain with your group during the entire performance. We hope you will enjoy the performance, but please remember that the performance is primarily for students. Above all else, you are to supervise and monitor your group.
- 3) Prepare your students for the performance by using the study guide or your own lesson plans.

- 4) The theatre staff's top priority is to provide a safe and comfortable environment for you and your students. Please cooperate with the Kentucky Repertory Theatre at Horse Cave staff and ushers at all time.
- 5) Prepare your students to enter the Theatre in single file. Position your chaperones in such a way as to maximize adult supervision of your group.
- 6) Trips to the restroom must wait until your group is seated in the Theatre. Then, if absolutely necessary, students may go, with teacher's permission. Please limit the number of students that you allow to exit the auditorium. Once the performance has begun students must remain seated until the intermission and after intermission until the end of the performance.
- 7) **NOT ALLOWED:** FOOD, GUM, DRINKS, SMOKING, RADIOS, CAMERAS, TAPE RECORDERS, PAGERS, CELL PHONES, WEAPONS OF ANY KIND, DISRUPTIVE TALKING, DESTUCTION / DEFACING OR PROPERTY, OR DISORDERLY AND INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR.
- 8) Any infraction of these rules will be grounds for immediate removal of the offending individuals.
- 9) If a disturbance in the theatre should occur, we reserve the right to raise house light levels in designated areas as a method of monitoring behavior. If the disturbance should continue, the performance may be halted. Further interruptions may result in a cancellation of the remainder of the performance.
- 10) It is at the discretion of the Kentucky Repertory Theatre at Horse Cave staff to put any individual or school group on probation or suspension from future Kentucky Repertory Theatre at Horse Cave performances as a result of unacceptable behavior.