The Story of My Life Study Guide

The Story of My Life by Helen Keller

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Introduction

Helen Keller overcame the seemingly insurmountable obstacles of deafness and blindness to become an influential lecturer and social activist. Keller has become, in American culture, an icon of perseverance, respected and honored by readers, historians, and activists. When she was a child, Keller received a letter from a writer that she quoted in her autobiography: "Some day you will write a great story out of your own head, that will be a comfort and help to many." This statement proved prophetic, as her autobiography *The Story of My Life*, published in the United States in 1903, is still read today for its ability to motivate and reassure readers. In her time, Keller was a celebrity and the publication of her autobiography was met with enthusiasm. The book was generally well received, and Keller later wrote a follow-up called *Midstream, My Later Life* in which she tells what happened in the twenty-five years after the publication of *The Story of My Life*.

Keller began working on *The Story of My Life* while she was a student at Radcliffe College, and it was first published in installments in *Ladies' Home Journal*. Helping her was an editor and Harvard professor named John Albert Macy, who later married Keller's first teacher and lifelong companion, Anne Sullivan. In the book Keller recounts the first twenty-two years of her life, from the events of the illness in her early childhood that left her blind and deaf through her second year at Radcliffe College. Prominent historical figures wander among the pages of *The Story of My Life:* She meets Alexander Graham Bell when she is only six and remains friends with him for years; she visits the acclaimed American poet John Greenleaf Whittier; and she exchanges correspondence with people like Oliver Wendell Holmes and Mrs. Grover Cleveland.

Author Biography

Helen Keller was born in Tuscumbia, Alabama, on June 27, 1880. She suffered a serious illness at the age of nineteen months that left her blind and deaf. While Keller initially devised gestures and actions to make herself understood, she knew that she was not like other children. Still, she learned to perform household chores such as folding laundry and tried to remain as much a part of the family as possible. Over the years, however, her frustration at not being understood made her angry and hostile, and she often erupted into uncontrolled fits.

Keller's parents realized that she needed special teaching but were unsure where to find it. When Keller was six years old, her parents took her to see Alexander Graham Bell, who recommended that they contact the Perkins Institute for the Blind. They did, and Anne Sullivan was sent to teach Keller how to communicate and also to educate her on a wide range of educational subjects.

Keller proved to be an enthusiastic and bright student. Once she had mastered the manual alphabet, Keller learned to read Braille and became a voracious reader. After hearing that a blind and deaf Norwegian girl had been taught to speak, Keller also learned to speak, attending Horace Mann School for the Deaf for instruction. Keller, and her escort Sullivan, also studied at a number of other schools, including Wright-Humason School for the Deaf and the Cambridge School for Young Ladies. In 1904, Keller graduated with honors from Radcliffe College. The year before her graduation, Keller published her first autobiography, *The Story of My Life*.

Keller committed her adult life to social activism. She gave lectures to increase public understanding of the challenges that face people with physical handicaps. Keller helped to improve schooling and general conditions for blind people and deaf people. In addition, she was active in promoting women's, children's, workers', and minorities' rights; and she was also outspoken about ways to prevent blindness in infants. Through it all Sullivan remained by Keller's side, supporting her and making sure she was communicating effectively with her various audiences. Sullivan died in 1936, but with the help of other supporters, Keller was able to continue pursuing social reform.

Many high honors were bestowed upon Keller, including numerous honorary degrees. Her circle of friends and associates included some of the greatest minds of the time, among them were Mark Twain, Oliver Wendell Holmes, John Greenleaf Whittier, Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, Sr., and three United States presidents.

Keller died on June 1, 1968, in Westport, Connecticut. The urn containing her ashes is housed in the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. Through her life and accomplishments, Keller demonstrated that having physical challenges does not preclude a person from living a full life.

Plot Summary

Chapters 1-5

After providing brief descriptions of her home in Alabama and her family members, Keller explains how she became disabled□a fever she had when she was nineteen months old left her blind and deaf□and her first memories of being disabled, recounting her early attempts to communicate. Keller reviews her parents' efforts to find her medical treatment and educational assistance, as well as her early experiences with her first teacher, Anne Sullivan.

Following the illness that left her blind and deaf, Keller got accustomed to the darkness and the silence but retained the memories of the sights and sounds she had enjoyed before her illness. Keller devised a simple system of gestures and tried very hard to make herself understood by her family. She knew when she was being difficult, but she felt she had to resort to fits of temper and frustration because the few signs she used to express herself were inadequate.

Keller's parents were hopeful when they read about Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, who had taught a deaf-blind girl named Laura Bridgman. They were also hopeful about a possible eye surgery, but the eye doctor could only refer them to Dr. Alexander Graham Bell, who knew about schools and teachers for children like Keller. Dr. Bell advised the Kellers to contact the Perkins Institution in Boston. Shortly before Keller's seventh birthday, Anne Sullivan arrived to educate Keller. Sullivan began teaching Keller the manual alphabet, and Keller learned it very quickly. Keller was thrilled to realize that there was a word to describe every object and idea.

Chapters 6-10

Keller chronicles her first several years of educational development, speaking of Sullivan's instructional methods, as well as her responses to Sullivan's demeanor and evolving techniques.

Keller progressed from learning the alphabet to learning words, and then to learning texts by authors such as William Shakespeare. Keller notes that the more she learned, the more questions she had. She began to learn to read when Sullivan placed pieces of paper with raised letters on objects to name them. For example, Sullivan would spell out "dress" in raised letters and pin the word to a dress.

Keller loved learning because Sullivan often took her outdoors. The subject Keller disliked was arithmetic, so she finished her lessons and immediately went to play rather than staying and asking questions as she normally did. Still, Keller did her best to grasp the ideas Sullivan struggled to teach. Keller comments in chapter seven, "It was my teacher's genius, her quick sympathy, her loving tact which made the first years of my education so beautiful."

Sullivan took Keller on a trip to Boston to visit the Perkins Institution. There, Keller befriended a number of the blind children, which delighted her. Sullivan then took her to some historical sites in Boston, teaching history lessons along the way. Arrangements were made for Sullivan and Keller to spend the summer in Cape Cod with a friend. Keller's descriptions of that summer are full of happy memories by the shore.

Chapters 11-15

After returning home from their summer in Cape Cod, Sullivan and Keller joined the rest of the Keller family, who decided to spend the autumn months at their summer cottage, nearby Fern Quarry. While there, the Kellers entertained many visitors and Keller delighted in the wonderful smells of the food prepared for the guests. There was a train in Fern Quarry, and it ran on a long trestle that spanned a gorge. One day, while Keller, Sullivan, and Keller's sister, Mildred, were out walking, they were stuck on the trestle when the train was coming and barely made it across in time.

Keller returned to the north for a winter and was amazed at the icicles, snow, and bare trees. She learned to toboggan and loved the thrill of the ride.

In 1890, Keller learned to speak, urged on by news that a blind-deaf Norwegian girl had learned to speak. In order to learn, Keller and Sullivan went to the Horace Mann School, led by Miss Sarah Fuller. Although it was a very difficult process, Keller practiced often and made remarkable progress.

In the winter of 1892, Keller wrote a story called "The Frost King." Her family was surprised that she was able to write such a good story, and Keller sent it to Mr. Anagnos, the director of the Perkins Institution and her good friend. He loved the story and published it in one of his newsletters. When it was discovered that a very similar story had already been published, Mr. Anagnos expressed doubt but was reassured by Keller that the story was original. Although he believed her at first, he was eventually convinced that Keller had deceived him, and the friendship came to an end. When Keller realized that she had inadvertently plagiarized the story□she truly thought she had created it, but she had read the other story before writing her own□ she felt deeply regretful. The experience made Keller question every thought she had, wondering if it was really her own or one that she had read and forgotten.

In 1893, Keller visited Niagara Falls, which filled her with wonder by its thundering roar. (Keller could feel the vibrations made by the falls.) That summer, she and Sullivan visited Bell, who accompanied them to the World's Fair. Keller was allowed to touch many of the items in the exhibits, and she was thrilled by having India, Egypt, and Peru come to life for her. In addition, Bell used some of the exhibits to explain scientific principles to Keller.

Chapters 16-20

Keller continued her studies and her speech practice, both on her own and with Sullivan. While visiting friends, Keller met Mr. Irons, a Latin scholar who took Keller on as a student.

In 1894, Keller attended a meeting of the American Association to Promote the Teaching of Speech to the Deaf. Arrangements were made for Keller to attend the Wright-Humason School for the Deaf, where she studied for two years. Sullivan enjoyed an occasional break, as some of the faculty members were able to communicate directly with Keller using the manual alphabet. Although her progress with lip-reading (which she did with her fingers) and speech disappointed her, she continued to work diligently.

In 1896, Keller enrolled in the Cambridge School for Young Ladies in preparation for her entrance into Radcliffe College. Because the teachers had no experience teaching a student like Keller, Sullivan attended every class, spelling out the lectures into Keller's hands. Keller enjoyed her time at Cambridge because she learned a wide variety of subjects that interested her and also because she had the chance to interact with other girls her age. When one of Keller's instructors believed that she was pushing herself too hard and should slow down, a disagreement arose between the instructor and Sullivan over Keller's ability to take her exams with the rest of her class. As a result, Keller left the school and prepared for her admissions tests for Radcliffe College. Although they were quite difficult given the unusual nature of Keller's needs, she passed.

Keller entered Radcliffe College full of hopes, dreams, and fantasies of what college life would be like. She discovered that college life was less romantic than she had imagined, and the courses more difficult. Still, her love for her subjects helped her maintain her enthusiasm.

Chapters 21-23

Keller describes her lifelong love of books, both for pleasure and for learning, and reviews some of her favorite authors and books. She discusses her love for the outdoors, explaining how she manages certain activities like canoeing and sailing. In the final chapter, she describes some of the "many men of genius" she has known. These men include Oliver Wendell Holmes, John Greenleaf Whittier, Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, and Alexander Graham Bell. She ends her book by praising her wonderfully supportive friends, without whom she could never have achieved all that she did.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The Story of My Life is the autobiography of Helen Keller, written in her third year at Radcliffe College. Though the autobiography of a 22-year-old might not interest most people, Helen's was very popular when it was first published in 1903. Helen had been blind and deaf since before the age of two, yet she had earned a place at Radcliffe College among hearing and seeing young women.

Helen was born near Tuscumbia, Alabama on June 23, 1880, into a well-connected family. Her father, Arthur H. Keller, had been a Confederate Captain who was related to Robert E. Lee. Helen's mother, Kate Adams Keller, was a well-read young woman from an intellectual family.

Arthur had two sons from a previous marriage, but Helen was Kate's first child, so she was fussed over, as many first children are. There were several family stories about how outgoing and persistent Helen was, even as a baby. For instance, she was supposed to have said, "How d'ye?" at six months old. She used her infant word for water, "wah-wah," right up until she learned to fingerspell "water" five years later. Helen took her first baby steps on her first birthday, as she chased the light and shadow that played on the bathroom floor. In short, Helen was a thriving, normal child for the first 19 months of her life.

Then, in February 1882, Helen suffered an acute fever, possibly scarlet fever, which took her sight and hearing. She had a few memories of sight and sound, but after her illness, she gradually forgot them. It would be years until she remembered them again, when Anne Sullivan came "to set my spirit free."

Chapter 1 Analysis

In this chapter, the reader meets an already accomplished young woman who suffered a tragic loss at an early age, but who wants to convey that she is also very fortunate and properly grateful.

First, she is fortunate in terms of her family. Without her parent's connections, and her mother's constant reading, it is unlikely that Helen's family would have learned there was a school that could help her. Second, she was naturally blessed with "an eager, self-asserting disposition." Her persistent temperament would serve her well in overcoming her obstacles.

Apparently, Helen was verbally gifted from the beginning. She was said to have spoken, or at least imitated, sounds at the early age of six months. This made her temporary loss of language seem more tragic, perhaps; but it also made it possible for her to

regain language in a new way at age six, which might have been too late for a less gifted child.

Throughout this book, the reader will see the ramifications of Helen's severe disabilities, but will also encounter her gratitude for her blessings and the people who became her patrons.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

For the next five years of her life, Helen lived in isolation. She developed a limited sign language, which her mother Kate understood. Helen learned to do a few chores – for instance, she would fold and put away her clothes – and she understood when her mother wanted something from upstairs.

A small vocabulary of signs was not enough, however. As Helen grew, so did her need to express herself. She began to have tantrums that she was unable to prevent or control. She felt something like regret after they passed.

Because of her rages, Helen's household tended to let her have her way whenever possible. Her one playmate, Martha, the daughter of the Keller's cook, understood Helen's signs, and generally allowed Helen to "tyrannize" her. The two girls played in the kitchen, fed the hens and turkeys and loved to hunt eggs outdoors. Once, at Helen's insistence, the two girls cut each other's hair, as any preschool children might.

In addition, like other children, Helen imitated the people around her. She would crawl up on her father's lap, put his eyeglasses on her own face and hold the newspapers he edited in front of her eyes. Of course, she could not figure out what it was all about.

Helen says nothing of her older half-brothers, but she remembers being very jealous of her baby sister, Mildred, who had "usurped" Helen's place in their mother's lap. Once, when Helen found Mildred asleep in a doll cradle, Helen went into one of her rages and tipped the cradle over. Fortunately, their mother was there to catch Mildred before she landed on the floor. The sisters did not become closer until much later, when Helen was "restored to my human heritage."

Chapter 2 Analysis

Again, as in Chapter 1, the reader sees all the ways Helen was similar to other children. She enjoyed family, friends and mischief. She felt the love of her parents. She took after her editor father, apparently, in being verbally gifted. She had a few chores, and she and her mother understood one another, even when other people had trouble understanding her. She was jealous of her little sister. She loved to "help" in the kitchen.

Her intelligence and talent served her well, in that they gave her skills such as her own sign language; however, they also were the cause of frustration and rage. Her energy and need for stimulation exceeded her parents' ability to train her. She was actually becoming a danger to herself and others.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Helen's desire to express herself grew, and so did the severity of her tantrums. It got to the point that she raged every day or several times throughout the day. Most of her family and friends felt that nothing could be done for her. Tuscumbia was so far away from any school for the blind and deaf, that most people in her world were not aware of any such resources. Kate (her mother) read about a blind and deaf student named Laura Bridgman, though, and that gave her some hope for Helen.

In the summer of 1886, Helen's parents took her to a famous eye doctor in Baltimore. She enjoyed everything about the trip – the train, the new people and the change of routine. "During the whole trip," she writes, "I did not have one fit of temper; there were so many things to keep my mind and fingers busy."

One of those things was a doll her aunt had made for her out of towels. It bothered Helen that the doll had no eyes. She pulled two beads off her aunt's cape and communicated that she wanted them sewn onto the doll's face. Her aunt did that, and then Helen lost interest in the doll.

The eye doctor could not help Helen's eyes, but he did put her parents in touch with Dr. Alexander Graham Bell. Helen loved Dr. Bell right away, because she could tell he understood her. Through Dr. Bell, her family became acquainted with Perkins Institute for the Blind in Boston, which sent Miss Anne Sullivan to Ivy Green the following March.

Sullivan's arrival freed Helen from bondage. "Thus I came up out of Egypt and stood before Sinai, and a power divine touched my spirit and gave it sight, so that I beheld many wonders. And from the sacred mountain I heard a voice which said, 'Knowledge is love and light and vision.'"

Chapter 3 Analysis

Things got worse for Helen and her family before they got better. In this chapter, Helen seems acutely aware that she could have been doomed by the common opinion of others who thought she could not be educated. Were it not for her parents' willingness to exhaust all possibilities, things easily could have degenerated to the point that she would have been institutionalized for the whole family's safety and peace of mind.

The story of Helen's fascination with the eyeless doll is particularly interesting, given that Helen was on her way to visit a famous eye doctor. Had her mother perhaps been able to communicate that this trip had to do with Helen's eyes? It was as if Helen had received the benefit of a kind of "play therapy" by being able to give her doll sight. Once that was accomplished, she could move on to other things.

While it was much later before Helen could really understand the import of the trip to Baltimore, it is clear from the amount of detail she remembers, that it was a huge event in her life. It was the first thing in a long time that had provided satisfactory stimulation for her hungry mind.

When Helen closes the chapter with reference to being led out of Egypt, she casts her teacher in the role of Moses. By this, the reader becomes acutely aware of Helen's gratitude toward Anne Sullivan, who rescued her student from the fate of a well-dressed animal.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Anne Sullivan came to teach Helen on March 3, 1887. Right away, Sullivan began to teach Helen to fingerspell using the manual alphabet. Helen enjoyed it as a game, but that is all it was to her at first.

Several weeks later, Helen became frustrated when Sullivan tried to teach her the difference between "mug" and "water." In a rage, Helen threw and broke a new doll. To cool Helen's temper, and perhaps to give herself a break, Sullivan took her pupil outdoors for a walk. The two came upon someone getting water from the pump. Just as she spelled everything else, Sullivan spelled "water" into Helen's hand, and something clicked. Helen suddenly understood that the spellings were names of things. The rest of that day was spent learning names for people close to her and the names of things in her surroundings. When she went to bed that night, Helen actually looked forward to the next day for the first time in her memory.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Anyone familiar with movie and television versions of Helen's story might notice something missing from this chapter. In the better-known accounts of Helen's life, there is conflict between Helen and her teacher, and between Helen's teacher and Helen's parents. Before Anne Sullivan could really become the teacher, she had to be Helen's disciplinarian.

In this account, though, the reader reads nothing of the battles between Helen and her teacher over table manners, or of the pair's residence in the garden house to separate Helen from her indulgent family. Moreover, the reader does not know whether Helen even is aware of this piece of her own history.

What is present in Helen's own account, however, is the sense of the miraculous. Her account is a snapshot of how creative discoveries are made. A period of intense work with no solution causes frustration. The person then takes a break, a nap or a walk outdoors. Suddenly, the solution arises. Somehow - who knows why - a pattern of movements under her palm became a word in Helen's mind. One moment she was an ignorant, raging child. The next, she understood that these finger movements were her bridge to the world.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

The rest of the summer, Helen built her vocabulary. The more it grew, the more she felt like part of the world. Most of her lessons that summer came from the nature. She had a child's natural fascination with the miracles all around her - how the rain and sun help plants grow, how animals get food. Helen also learned to fear the power of nature. One day that summer, she was in a tree, waiting for her teacher to return with lunch, when a storm suddenly arose. It was a long time before she climbed a tree again. When she did, it became one of her favorite pastimes.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Helen's telling of this story is another example of the theme of her mixed blessings. One can feel that Helen considered herself lucky, because she could take none of the miracles of nature for granted. Yet, nature could also be more menacing than it might have been to a child with all five senses intact. This paradox is a theme throughout the book: though Helen has many blessings, few can comprehend her sorrows.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Helen needed to move from knowing names of concrete things and actions, to knowing how to recognize and communicate abstractions. Her next big step came, again, as she was trying to solve a problem. Helen was concentrating very hard, and Anne Sullivan tapped Helen's forehead, emphatically spelling, "THINK!" Helen says she knew "in a flash" that "think" was the name for what she was doing. She worked for a long time, she says, before she could understand the meaning of the word "love."

Anne Sullivan reasoned that normal children learn language by being exposed to it constantly. Thus, she "spoke" to Helen constantly, using the manual alphabet to help Helen learn the words and figures of speech people used in speaking to each other. It was a long time before Helen could initiate much conversation, but as Sullivan continued to give her language, Helen's abilities and intellect continued to grow.

Chapter 6 Analysis

An average child is constantly exposed to language. From the time s/he is in the womb until almost the age of two, s/he understands what is being said long before s/he can use many words to communicate with others. Helen had had a lot of catching up to do. Her teacher saturated her thirsty mind with language just as a parent does with an infant. Sullivan exposed Helen to the language through constant talking and word games of her own invention like "Where's your nose?" Daily immersion in language allowed Helen to make the cognitive leaps necessary to function at her highest level.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

As soon as she could fingerspell some words, Helen began learning to read, using slips of cardboard with words printed in raised letters. At first, she would attach the correct words to objects and spell out sentences about them, such as "doll is on bed," or "girl is in wardrobe." She would play like this for hours.

The first book Helen read from was "Reader for Beginners." Like any child learning to read, she started out just finding words she knew. It was like a game of hide-and-seek, and each word she found thrilled her.

Helen did not have formal lessons yet, so all of her learning felt like play. Most of her reading and studying happened outdoors, where Helen kept learning more about the world around her. She and her teacher often walked to Keller's Landing by the Tennessee River. Though she did not realize it, Helen began to learn about geography on these walks. She thought she was just playing, but she was actually learning by making dams with pebbles, or islands, lakes, and riverbeds with clay.

Math was the only subject Helen did not like. She used kindergarten sticks to practice basic addition and subtraction, but once she had solved a few problems each day, she would return to learning about things that interested her. One time, a man sent Helen some fossils. These prompted a lesson about dinosaurs, which gave her nightmares. On another occasion, someone gave her a shell, and she was surprised and happy to hear how a mollusk had built it. Her teacher also taught her to see metaphor in nature: how a mollusk building a shell is similar to a human using knowledge to build a mind.

Chapter 7 Analysis

In this chapter, Helen shows the reader how active her life was now that she had language. She also illustrates an opinion she will share later in the book: she believes that education is best when approached in a joyful, leisurely fashion. She also foreshadows her future troubles in mathematics, when she speaks of her minimal attention to it. It was not until she was older that she learnt the strategy of applying herself to something that did not particularly interest her. At that time, her teacher capitalized on Helen's natural interests, so that she could learn swiftly. Helen almost strains to communicate to the reader just how much credit Sullivan deserves for all that Helen has accomplished.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Nine months after Anne Sullivan came to Tuscumbia, Helen had her first real Christmas celebration. For the first time, she was a giver, as well as receiver, and she enjoyed the anticipation. On Christmas Eve, the Tuscumbia schoolchildren had their Christmas tree, and Helen was invited to participate. She was allowed to present the children their gifts. Helen also had gifts to open under that tree, which only made her more excited for "real Christmas" to come.

Helen hung her stocking and tried to stay awake to catch Santa Claus leaving presents, but finally fell asleep. She was the first to wake up Christmas morning and was astounded to find presents everywhere. Her favorite present came from Anne Sullivan - a canary named Little Tim. Helen learned to care for him herself. Unfortunately, a big cat got him when she left Tim's cage to get water for the bird.

Chapter 8 Analysis

In this brief chapter, Helen experiences several milestones of a "normal" childhood. She has the pleasure of preparing surprises for her loved ones. She learns the story of Santa Claus and actively participates in the Christmas customs of her culture. She has the responsibility of caring for a pet and experiences its death. These landmark experiences came on her first "real Christmas," because of her newly acquired language. Each of these events made her more a part of the world.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

In May 1888, Helen visited the Perkins Institute in Boston. The trip was "as if a beautiful fairy tale had come true." As soon as she arrived, Helen met other children who knew the manual alphabet. She immediately had friends and felt she had come home to her own country. She felt great pain, though, when she realized that all of her new friends were blind. However, when she realized they were "happy and contented," her sorrow passed.

Helen enjoyed several history lessons in Boston. She visited Bunker Hill one day and Plymouth the next. She was interested most in Plymouth Rock, because she could touch it. She did not know then, she says, that the Pilgrims had persecuted others; she only knew then that they traveled to Plymouth for their own religious freedom.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Helen compares her first train trip and her trip to Boston in this chapter. She wants her reader to notice that, instead of an immature creature who must be entertained, she is now a well-behaved student.

Helen's concern with the blindness of others is an interesting similarity between the two trips. . In the first trip, a towel doll without eyes arrested her attention. On this trip, Helen feels intense pain over the blindness of her new friends at the Perkins Institute. She feels for others the pain she does not feel for herself. Rather quickly, however, she decides to see them as she sees herself, "happy and contented," and the painful feelings are dismissed.

By mentioning the Pilgrims' persecution of other groups, Helen begins to show us her developing social conscience. Later in her life, she will work on behalf of women's suffrage, birth control, trade unionism, and against child labor. Now, as a college student, she is just beginning to turn her childhood sympathy for others into an active concern for social justice.

Helen closes this chapter with the mention of a family in Boston who became friends and supporters of hers. Throughout this book, which was first published as a series of articles in "Ladies Home Journal," Helen mentions by name various distinguished people. The reader should know that Helen is not namedropping for vanity's sake. She is giving credit to people who have provided financial aid for her education. Whether Helen realizes it or not, such public thanks offered a possible motivation for other wealthy people to contribute their support to Helen and other people with disabilities.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

After visiting Boston, Helen and her teacher vacationed at Cape Cod with a friend, Mrs. Hopkins. The first time she was in the ocean, Helen was pulled under and badly frightened. She asked Anne Sullivan, "Who put salt in the water?" After that, she enjoyed being splashed by the waves from her seat on a large rock. For a few hours, she took possession of a horseshoe crab. She dragged it to the Hopkins home from the beach, but it escaped the first night.

Chapter 10 Analysis

The story of Helen's scare in the ocean reminds us that, though she is extremely capable, she would be lost without guidance and help. She had an independent child's spirit, the kind that would drag a crab home by its legs, but she could never be as independent as she might like.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

When fall arrived, Helen traveled with her family to Fern Quarry for their vacation in the mountains outside Tuscumbia. There, Helen spent her days riding her pony, walking outdoors or gathering persimmons with her little sister Mildred and their cousins.

One day, Helen, Mildred and Miss Sullivan got lost in the woods. Mildred recognized a railroad trestle over a deep gorge, which they decided to use to find their way home. As they were crossing the trestle, a train approached. The three climbed underneath, onto the cross braces, and held on to the swaying trestles, terrified, while the train went overhead.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Helen, now a busy college student, remembers the leisure and adventures of her childhood.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

That winter, and almost every winter afterward, Helen spent in the North. When she was almost nine years old, Helen experienced snow for the first time. Her favorite sport was tobogganing.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Helen's formal education did not commence until later, so it is unclear why this Southern child spent cold winters in the North. Whatever the reason, she seems to have enjoyed the experience.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

The spring of 1890 found Helen restless and frustrated once again. When she was younger, her homemade sign language was an adequate mode of expression. Now, her need to communicate had grown beyond fingerspelling. She wanted to learn to speak. Her friends discouraged her, trying to protect her from disappointment. However, Helen learned about Ragnhild Kaata, a deaf and blind girl in Norway, who had learned to talk. Helen nagged Anne Sullivan until the teacher took her to see Sarah Fuller, principal of the Horace Mann School for the Deaf.

Fuller herself became Helen's speech teacher. Helen felt the positions of Fuller's tongue and lips as she made sounds. As usual, Helen was a quick learner. Her first spoken sentence was, "It is warm." Sarah Fuller gave Helen the elements of speech in eleven sessions. The rest of Helen's progress was due to constant practice with Sullivan. It took a long time and lots of practice before very many people could understand her. (Even at the time of writing this book, in her early 20s, Helen's teacher still corrected her mispronunciations.) The thought that her little sister Mildred would be able to understand her was a powerful motivation for Helen. It was a tremendous moment for Helen and her family when she returned home and spoke to them for the first time. Remembering that day always brought her to tears.

Helen found speech to be so much faster than fingerspelling that, she quit the latter, though her teacher and a few others continued to spell to her. She "listened" to fingerspelling by placing her own hand lightly over the spelling hand of the other person, so as not to interfere with their movements. She "heard" words, not individual letters, just as readers of print see words, rather than individual letters.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Helen's gifted mind continues to seek higher and higher levels of functioning in this chapter. It is not enough for her to be able to converse with a few people. She wants to be a full citizen of the world. Her active mind produces expressive ideas.

Helen's life at this point is parallel to her life in the period just before Anne Sullivan came into her life. Then, her own invented sign language was insufficient to her needs. Now, the manual alphabet limits her from communicating with most hearing people. Then, her parents' friends thought Helen could not be educated. Now, Helen's friends thought she could not speak. Just as her mother had persevered once she read of Laura Bridgman, now Helen persevered once she heard of Ragnhild Kaata. In both cases, Helen got the teacher she needed. Even though her speech was imperfect, Helen worked, and would continue to work, until she could speak to the whole world.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Helen weathered her first public controversy at the age of 11. After she learned to speak, she wrote down a story, which she thought was her own. She titled it "The Frost King" and sent it to Mr. Anagnos at Perkins Institute. He promptly published it in one of the school's publications, and was embarrassed when it turned out that the story was plagiarized. The original story was by Margaret T. Canby and called "The Frost Fairies."

An anonymous council of eight adults and Mr. Agnagnos questioned Helen at the Perkins Institute, to find out if she had plagiarized this story on purpose. She did not remember hearing of Canby's story before, but now believes that she must have heard it when she was younger and forgotten about it. The whole incident was very traumatic, despite having the support of people like Mark Twain. She lost Mr. Anagnos's friendship, though he claimed later to have believed Helen; and, for a time she even lost her love of books.

Chapter 14 Analysis

This incident was the first of many times that Helen was accused of being less than genuine. Because so much information about the world came through Anne Sullivan's fingers, Helen's thoughts were often discredited as being merely imitative. However, Helen herself gives the most sensible explanation for what happened: as a budding young writer, she naturally and unconsciously imitated what she read.

One might wonder why, in her description of this incident, Helen seems to "go easy" on Mr. Anagnos. After all, he accused Helen and Anne Sullivan of insincerity, when he so lavishly praised Helen and her story in order to bring publicity to his school. However, one must remember that Mr. Anagnos was the person who sent Anne Sullivan to Helen in the first place. Helen would not have wanted to seem ungrateful, especially in front of other prospective benefactors.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Helen spent the next summer and winter in Alabama with her family. She begins this chapter by saying that being at home made her forget all about the controversy and inquisition over "The Frost King." Nonetheless, she found it hard to write. She feared that she would later discover that the ideas were not her own. To help her get past this, her teacher gave her an assignment to write the story of her own life – Helen was then 12 – for a magazine called *Youth's Companion*.

Helen next describes what she calls the "big events" of 1893. She went to President Cleveland's inauguration, to Niagara, and to the World's Fair. She says that although she could not see the American Falls at Niagara, their power made a big impression on her. She says that, for her, beauty and music are like goodness and love. She feels their power even though she cannot see or hear them. Helen attended the World's Fair with Anne Sullivan and Dr. Alexander Graham Bell. She had permission to touch the exhibits: so, with the exception of the Egyptian mummies, she explored everything. She felt like she had been around the world

Chapter 15 Analysis

Though Helen assures the reader she is not resentful about "The Frost King" incident, she has clearly thought a lot about the questions it raised. Even if she had never had the fever that left her blind and deaf, the writer in Helen would have had to grapple with the concept of ideas – who owns them, how to digest them and how to make them your own. These questions have particular urgency for Helen, because so much of her experience and communications come through the medium of Anne Sullivan.

In her early 20s, when most people are separating or have separated from older authority figures, Helen needed the assistance of her teacher as much as ever. All her life, she dealt with the charge that her ideas were not her own, that she was just parroting the ideas of Anne Sullivan. Yet, Helen outlived Sullivan by over 30 years, writing and speaking actively that entire time. Sullivan's insistence that Helen write immediately about something that could not be plagiarized, her own life, put Helen back in touch with her own experience of truth.

In her description of her travels, Helen attempts to make the reader understand that she has experiences of beauty and music that are just as valid, just as real, as any person's experience of goodness and love. Someone else may have written the story "The Frost King," but no one else could claim Helen's experience at Niagara Falls or the World's Fair.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

By the age of 13, Helen had learned to fingerspell, to read in raised print and in Braille and to speak in English (even a little in French). Then, in October 1893, she began her formal schooling in preparation for college by taking Latin and math lessons. At first, she did not like the Latin any more than math, but she soon grew to love it.

Chapter 16 Analysis

Up to this point, Helen's learning has been based on her interests. Anne Sullivan's method with Helen was to follow her interests, teaching her what she asked to know, providing her with experiences. At this time, Helen systematically worked at something that did not offer immediate gratification. She had a goal and tackled steps to that goal. Along the way, she learned to like studying Latin, though perhaps that is not so surprising, as she had a gift for various languages. Homeschoolers or "unschoolers" who believe that a child-led method of education is most effective often refer to Sullivan's work with Helen today.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

For the next two years, Helen studied at the Wright-Humason School for the Deaf in New York. Ms. Sullivan attended as her interpreter. They chose that school because it was the best for continuing the development of Helen's speech and lip-reading skills. She also studied math, geography, French and German.

Helen was disappointed – and she says her teachers were, too – that she did not learn to speak more like other people, although she worked hard at it. She did not learn to like or excel at math. Despite these setbacks, her love for languages and geography gave her fond memories of her time in New York. As for the city itself, the only thing she liked was Central Park. Helen loved being immersed in nature, and her daily walks in Central Park were the closest she could get to her former life in the country.

Chapter 17 Analysis

Several now-familiar aspects of Helen's character are represented in this chapter. She has a gift for verbal tasks and a weakness in math; she loves nature and thrives outdoors.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

For the next phase of her formal education, Helen went to the Cambridge School for Young Ladies. This was her first experience of attending classes with hearing and seeing girls. Not only was this new for Helen and the other girls, but also her teachers were not used to it, either. Sullivan spelled into Helen's hand all the instructions, as well as what was in the books. Helen's patrons in London and Philadelphia worked to have textbooks embossed in raised print, so that Helen could read for herself. Unfortunately, it was hard to get the books ready in time to do Helen any good.

The principal and the German teacher learned to fingerspell, so that they could give Sullivan a break sometimes. Of course, they were not as fluent as Sullivan was. The principal, Mr. Gilman, took over teaching Helen in English Literature for part of that year. Some of the girls also learned the manual alphabet so they could speak to Helen directly, and she enjoyed speaking directly with a few girls her own age. At Christmas, Helen's mother and sister came to visit. Mildred ended up staying there to study as well. As a result, Helen was not lonely at Cambridge.

In the summer of 1897, Helen took preliminary exams to enter Radcliffe College. Even though she had to take them without the help of her interpreter, she passed everything she tested in and earned "honours" in German and English.

Chapter 18 Analysis

By attaining an education that a hearing and seeing young woman would be proud of, Helen continues toward her goal of proving herself. The fact that the principal of her new preparatory school learned to fingerspell, so that he could teach her himself, gives the reader an idea of how prestigious it must have been to have Helen attend his school.

Helen does not mention it in this chapter, but her father died in August of 1896. Though she wrote of him in earlier chapters as a loving and indulgent father, she does not mention his death now. His absence may be part of the reason Mildred stayed to study with Helen.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

The second year at Gilman's school was, from the beginning, very frustrating for Helen. She was forced to face her old nemesis, mathematics, without the tools she needed. Many of her books were not ready at the beginning of school. The classes were larger and none of the Cambridge teachers could give her special instruction. Anne Sullivan had to read all the books to her. Helen had to wait to buy a Braillewriter to do her algebra, geometry and physics. She could not just look up at the blackboard to see geometrical drawings: she had to represent them on "a cushion with strings and curved wires." Helen says that she is ashamed to remember how she showed her feelings sometimes, and that her behavior was later "used against Miss Sullivan."

As Helen's books and supplies began to arrive, though, it got a little easier. She felt she was already beginning to do better when conflict arose between Mr. Gilman and Miss Sullivan. Gilman felt Helen was working too hard, and pointed to her frustrated behavior of the earlier weeks to prove it. He wanted her to take things more slowly, and stay at his school for more than two years. Helen, meanwhile, wanted to be able to go to Radcliffe with her friends. The conflict ended when Helen's mother pulled not only Helen, but also her younger sister Mildred, out of Gilman's school.

Helen continued to prepare for Radcliffe with the help of individual tutors. One of these, Mr. Keith, finally helped her understand math. In January 1899, Helen took final exams for admission to Radcliffe College. Anne Sullivan was not allowed to be present, so the exam papers were typed in Braille. However, the type of Braille used for algebra and geometry was different from Standard English Braille, which was all she knew. In spite of such difficulties, Helen passed her exams.

Chapter 19 Analysis

Throughout her life, speculation occurred as to whom, if anyone was taking advantage of Helen. The Gilmans of the world suggested that it was Anne Sullivan's ambition, not Helen's, to get to Radcliffe after two years at Gilman's school. He may have felt it was not necessary to rush. Perhaps Helen's mother felt that Gilman was trying to slow Helen down in order to extend the prestige she brought to his school. Maybe that is why she pulled both of her daughters out. Perhaps Sullivan was out to prove what Helen could do, or perhaps Helen was just a teenaged girl who was tired of being different and wanted to go to college with her friends. What obligations do educational institutions have to make sure their methods of instruction and testing are fair for all of their students? These are the types of issues raised in this chapter.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

Helen could enter Radcliffe whenever she wanted, but to feel more prepared, especially in math, she tutored another year with Mr. Keith. She entered Radcliffe in the fall of 1900, thinking all would now be "beauty and light" in the "wonderland of the Mind."

By the time she wrote this chapter, Helen had lost her romanticism about college. The thing she misses most is time to think and reflect. She remarks wryly, "One goes to college to learn, it seems, not to think." She cannot take notes in class, because her hands are "busy listening." Instead, she makes notes after class. She uses her Braille typewriter to do her work, "so that the professors have no difficulty in finding out how little I know." Helen sometimes struggles with feelings of jealousy toward her peers, who need less time to study. However, she is quick to say that she has the help of her friends, who get her as many raised-print books as possible.

Helen enjoys studying the great works for the literature itself, absent the interference of dissection and analysis. Helen feels that her professors usually obscure the great works, rather than reveal them. She praises her Shakespeare professor as an exception to this rule. In general, she is annoyed by all the criticism. "A thousand odds and ends of knowledge come crashing about my head like hailstorms, and when I try to escape them, theme-goblins and college nixies of all sorts pursue me, until I wish – oh, may I be forgiven the wicked wish! – That I might smash the idols I came to worship."

While she has lost her romantic ideas about college, she still values true education. "… We should take our education as we would take a walk in the country, leisurely, our minds hospitably open to impressions of every sort."

Chapter 20 Analysis

It is ironic that after fighting to be able to enter Radcliffe with her friends, Helen took another year to prepare. Moreover, by the end of this chapter, she seems to have agreed with Mr. Gilman's viewpoint that there is no need to rush education. While from the first she was known as a being with a will of her own, this chapter establishes the educated Helen as a person with a mind of her own. She was also very much a young woman, who would have loved to have some leisure. The absence of any mention of suitors is poignant. Surely, a person with as much passion for life, ideas, nature and loyalty had the capacity for great love. Was it all spent on her family, teacher and friends?

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary

Helen uses this chapter to give the reader a history of her relationship with literature. The first book "of any consequence" that she read was "Little Lord Fauntleroy." She read her embossed version so often it wore out. Helen read all kinds of books from then on, but disliked fables in which animals are made to act and talk like people.

She loves poetry, including the Romantic poets, ancient Greek mythology and the Bible. "Great poetry," she writes, "needs no other interpreter than a responsive heart. Would that the host of those who make the great works of the poets odorous by their analysis, impositions and laborious comments might learn this simple truth!"

When Helen was a child, the Bible bored her. As a young adult, she loves the good she finds in it, while wishing to get rid of its brutality. She loves the stories of Esther and of Ruth. Helen has always loved Shakespeare. His tragedies impressed her more as a child, whereas now the comedies are her delight. She has empathy even for the villains in great literature. "There are moments when I feel that the Shylocks, the Judases, and even the Devil, are broken spokes in the great wheel of good which shall in due time be made whole."

She has an interest in history, and in German and French literature. She also enjoys American writers like Mark Twain, who, like so many other writers, is her friend. "In a word, literature is my Utopia. Here I am not disfranchised."

Chapter 21 Analysis

Books are such an important force in Helen's life that she strays here from her chronological autobiography to give them their own chapter.

Although Anne Sullivan did not communicate to Helen a specific creed or religion, she tried to answer her questions. When Helen was 8 years old, she interviewed Bishop Phillips Brooks on the nature of God and found his answers satisfactory. In this chapter, she discusses the Bible as a collection of literature, more than a record of religion.

She remarks, "The Bible gives me a deep, comforting sense that 'things seen are temporal, and things unseen are eternal.'" Of course, there is some religious belief conveyed here, just as in the idea that "the broken spokes…shall in due time be made whole." However, more to the point, Helen is telling the reader that, though her deafness and blindness may lock her out of some experiences, they are but temporal. She has as much access to what is real, she maintains, as does the rest of humanity.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary

Helen's amusements, when she is not reading, are not very different from those of other young women. She still loves to be outside and to swim. She enjoys canoeing, especially on moonlit nights, and her favorite pastime is sailing.

Helen also speaks of her love for her "tree friends." She feels so close to them that she imagines she can hear their sap flow and see the sunshine on their leaves. "It seems to me, that there is in each of us a capacity to comprehend the impressions and emotions which have been experienced by mankind from the beginning. Each individual has a subconscious memory of the green earth and murmuring waters, and blindness and deafness cannot rob him of this gift from past generations. This inherited capacity is a sort of 6th sense – a soul-sense which sees, feels, hears, all in one."

She is aware of conflicts in the world, but when she is outdoors, they seem temporary and are not as real to her as the natural beauty all around her. Yet, when she visits the poor in cities, she is outraged by the conditions they live in. "Their life seems an immense disparity between effort and opportunity," she writes.

Other pastimes she enjoys are riding her tandem bicycle and walking her dog. Indoors, she likes to knit and crochet, play chess and checkers, and solitaire with Braille cards. She enjoys entertaining younger children. She likes museums and art stores, where she can feel sculptures. She enjoys the theatre and she has met many actors and actresses.

Helen admits in this chapter that sometimes she is saddened by her lack of sight and hearing. She sometimes feels alone. She maintains, though, "Everything has its wonders, even darkness and silence, and I learn, whatever state I may be in, therein to be content."

Chapter 22 Analysis

Helen revisits the theme that she is similar to, and different from other humans. She is never alone, yet always alone.

Except for the fact that Carl Jung had not yet begun to develop his understanding of the collective unconscious, Helen's idea of a "6th sense" in this chapter could have come from his work. "It seems to me," Helen writes, "that there is in each of us a capacity to comprehend the impressions and emotions which have been experienced by mankind from the beginning. Each individual has a subconscious memory of the green earth and murmuring waters, and blindness and deafness cannot rob him of this gift from past generations."

However, one remembers that Helen did indeed see "green earth" and hear "murmuring waters," for the first 19 months of her life. At the time of her writing, people were not as aware as we are today of how much a child remembers from the earliest days. Still, the idea that Helen could call upon those memories after 20 year of total darkness and silence is astounding.

Helen's visits to the poor, and her outrage at their lifestyle, are the beginning of an awakening for her. In a later book, she will write, "I had once believed that we are all masters of our fate – that we could mould our lives into any form we pleased. I had overcome deafness and blindness sufficiently to be happy, and I supposed that anyone could come out victorious if he threw himself valiantly into life's struggle. However, as I went more and more about the country I learned that I had spoken with assurance on a subject I knew little about. I forgot that I owed my success partly to the advantages of my birth and environment. Now, however, I learned that the power to rise in the world is not within the reach of everyone." Though it will be 10 years before she writes those words, this chapter shows the beginning of her struggle with the paradoxes of social injustice and personal power.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 Summary

The final chapter of Helen's autobiography reads like a distinguished "who's who." She wants to acknowledge the people who have helped to make her life a happy one. Some of these people are famous, some are not and some want to remain anonymous. Her only unkind words are for newspaper reporters, whom she includes in the category of "the stupid and curious," and for people who are condescending to her.

She got her own understanding of religion from Bishop Brooks, who taught her that "there is one universal religion, Helen – the religion of Love," and that "God is Love." After he died, she continued to find his way of approaching religion the most "soul-satisfying."

She also knows Henry Drummond, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Whittier, Dr. Edward Hale, Mr. And Mrs. Laurence Hutton, Mark Twain, John Burroughs, and many others. She mentions also an anonymous benefactor who paid her way to go to college. Not all of this name-dropping is the bragging of a 20-something young woman. It is done in the spirit of gratitude and of hope that others who would like to be included in this elite group might step forward to support, not only Helen and her teacher, but also the cause of people with disabilities everywhere. Her last line conveys this theme well, "Thus it is that my friends have made the story of my life. In a thousand ways they have turned my limitations into beautiful privileges, and enabled me to walk serene and happy in the shadow cast by my deprivation."

Characters

Mr. Anagnos

Mr. Anagnos was the director of the Perkins Institution. He sent Anne Sullivan to the Kellers' home. He and Keller became friends, and he had her sit on his knee when she visited the Institution. When Keller wrote "The Frost King, "she sent it to him for his birthday, but because Mr. Anagnos came to believe that she intentionally plagiarized it, the friendship was forever ruined.

Dr. Alexander Graham Bell

Dr. Alexander Graham Bell first met Keller when she was six years old and her parents brought her to him for advice on how to teach her. Dr. Bell suggested that they contact the Perkins Institution for the Blind, which they did. Dr. Bell remained a friend to Keller and Anne Sullivan and accompanied them on a trip to the World's Fair.

As a child, Keller sensed Bell's tender disposition, as she notes in chapter three, "Child as I was, I at once felt the tenderness and sympathy which endeared Dr. Bell to so many hearts, as his wonderful achievements enlist their admiration." *The Story of My Life* is dedicated to him.

Bishop Brooks

One of the "many men of genius" Keller knew, Bishop Brooks knew Keller from her childhood. He spoke beautifully to her throughout her life of religion, God, and spiritual matters, and he emphasized no particular religion as much as the importance of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of humankind. Keller enjoyed his company because he always gave her something meaningful to ponder.

Margaret T. Canby

Canby was the author of "The Frost Fairies," on which Keller's "The Frost King" was inadvertently based. Canby sent Keller an encouraging letter in which she expressed her belief that some day, Keller would write her own story that would be a comfort to its readers.

Dr. Chisholm

Dr. Chisholm was the oculist (eye doctor) who regretfully told the Kellers he could do nothing for their daughter. He did, however, refer them to Dr. Alexander Graham Bell.

Charles Townsend Copeland

Copeland taught Keller's English composition class at Radcliffe College. She credited him with bringing "freshness" and "power" to literature, a subject she always loved.

Ella

Ella, Helen's childhood nurse, was subject to Helen's terrible fits and spiteful acts.

Miss Sarah Fuller

Fuller was the principal of the Horace Mann School, where Keller learned to speak. Keller writes in chapter thirteen, "This lovely, sweet-natured lady offered to teach me herself, and we began the twenty-sixth of March, 1890."

Mr. Gilman

Gilman was the principal at Radcliffe College. He was one of two instructors who learned the manual alphabet so that he could communicate directly with Keller.

Frau Gröte

Gröte was Keller's German teacher at Radcliffe College. She was one of two teachers who learned the manual alphabet and so was able to instruct Keller directly.

Oliver Wendell Holmes

One of the "many men of genius" Keller knew, Holmes once called upon Sullivan and Keller to visit him. Keller smelled leather and ink in the room, so she knew she was surrounded by books. When Holmes shed a tear over a poem, Keller was touched.

Mr. Irons

A friend of a family Anne Sullivan and Keller visited, Irons was a Latin scholar who took Keller on as a student. Keller describes him as "a man of rare, sweet nature and of wide experience." Irons also taught Keller about literature, and from his instruction she learned "to know an author, to recognize his style as I recognize the clasp of a friend's hand."

Mr. Keith

Keith was Keller's mathematics instructor at the Cambridge School for Young Ladies. It was not until she took his class that she truly understood the subject. After Keller withdrew from the Cambridge School for Young Ladies, Keith continued to teach her mathematics by coming to see her. In chapter nineteen, Keller describes him as "always gentle and forbearing, no matter how dull I might be, and believe me, my stupidity would often have exhausted the patience of Job."

Arthur H. Keller

Helen's father, Arthur Keller had been a captain in the Confederate army. Helen's mother, Kate, was Arthur's second wife, and he was much older than she was. Keller describes him as "loving and indulgent, devoted to his home, seldom leaving us, except in the hunting season." He was a hospitable man who enjoyed bringing guests home to see his garden.

Helen Keller

Helen Keller is the author of the autobiography. In infancy, she fell seriously ill (the exact diagnosis is unknown) and was left blind and deaf. She realized that she was different from the others around her, but she did her best to make herself understood. She had a loving relationship with her sister and often retreated to her mother's warm embrace when she was hurt or angry. After years of difficulty communicating, Keller became extremely willful and hostile and would resort to fitful episodes out of frustration. She notes in chapter three, "I felt as if invisible hands were holding me, and I made frantic efforts to free myself." Her parents were no longer able to control or reach her, and they knew she needed special training. After contacting the Perkins Institution for the Blind in Boston, they welcomed a teacher, Anne Sullivan, to their home.

Keller regards Sullivan's arrival as the most important day of her life. Keller was a motivated and intelligent student and relishes her memories of first understanding the letters of the manual alphabet, which allowed her to learn the names of objects and ideas. After she learned to read Braille, she felt the world open up further for her. Next she learned to speak, and eventually went on to attend Radcliffe College (with Sullivan at her side), from which she graduated with honors in 1904.

Recognizing the blessings in her life led Keller to put her education and drive to work on behalf of others like herself. She became a vocal advocate for the physically challenged and made strides in educating the public about the needs of the blind, deaf, and mute. She was tireless in her pursuit of social reforms and extended her efforts to include feminist issues and minorities' rights. For her work, she received various awards and honorary doctorates. In fact, she was the first woman to receive an honorary doctorate from Harvard. After Sullivan's death in 1936, Keller continued her efforts with the help of other supporters. Keller died in 1968.

Kate Keller

Helen's mother, Kate Keller was an early source of comfort to the troubled child. After the arrival of Sullivan, Kate Keller learned the manual alphabet so that she could communicate effectively with her daughter. Although she sometimes felt threatened by Sullivan, to whom Helen was so deeply attached, she realized that in order for her daughter to thrive, the deeply bonded student-teacher relationship was necessary.

Mildred Keller

Helen's sister, Mildred Keller accompanied her on nature walks and to gather berries. Mildred was with Sullivan and Keller on the day they sped across the trestle just before the train.

Miss Reamy

Keller's German teacher at the Wright-Humason School for the Deaf, Reamy knew the manual alphabet and so was able to teach Keller directly rather than through Sullivan.

John P. Spaulding

Spaulding was a dear friend to Keller, although little is said of their relationship except that she knew him in Boston. She describes his death (in 1896) as "the greatest sorrow that I have ever borne, except the death of my father." She adds, "Only those who knew and loved him best can understand what his friendship meant to me."

Anne Mansfield Sullivan

When Anne Sullivan went to teach Keller in March 1887, she was only twenty years old and a recent graduate of the Perkins Institution for the Blind. When she was very young, she and her brother were sent to an almshouse (a charitable home for the poor, usually providing very bad living conditions at that time) in Massachusetts, where she contracted an eye disease that left her with severely impaired vision. Having overcome her own vision problems, she had the benefit of understanding what it was like not to be able to access the world through all five senses. She knew that discipline would be the first priority if she was to be an effective teacher, and she was as patient in disciplining Keller as she was in tutoring her.

Sullivan used Samuel Gridley Howe's approach to teaching the blind and deaf. This consisted of using the manual alphabet to spell out words in the student's hand. While Howe believed in structured lessons, Sullivan opted for more spontaneous lessons. She was acutely aware of her environment and her student's interests, so she sought opportunities to teach in everyday moments, such as while taking a walk or preparing

for a holiday. Sullivan taught Keller the manual alphabet, Braille, and a wide range of educational subjects, and she accompanied her to special schools to learn advanced subjects. When Keller attended Radcliffe College, Sullivan repeated lectures and class discussions using Howe's method.

Throughout Keller's life, Sullivan was dedicated to supporting her efforts in education and in social reform. Sullivan was always with Keller, helping her to communicate to her audience and being a go-between as Keller met new and interesting people. This dedication to her student was uninterrupted even after Sullivan married Keller's editor, John Albert Macy. Sullivan died in 1936.

Martha Washington

The child of the Kellers' cook, Washington was an African-American girl who understood Helen's first, simple signs. Martha and Helen both enjoyed mischief and had fun playing together, although Helen enjoyed being domineering with her friend.

John Greenleaf Whittier

One of the "many men of genius" Keller met, Whittier was an accomplished poet who was impressed with Keller's speaking ability. After discussing poetry with Keller, Whittier praised Sullivan's fine work as a teacher.

Themes

Perseverance

Perhaps the single greatest lesson readers take away from *The Story of My Life* is the value of perseverance. Without the ability to see or hear, Keller learned to function and interact within society in a meaningful way. Her drive to make a place for herself in the world started when she was very young. Even as a child, she found ways to help her mother around the house, rather than stay in a world that was dark, silent, and lonely. In fact, the terrible fits for which she is so well-known were the product of her extreme frustration at not being able to make herself understood and not having anyone else reach out and communicate with her. Once she overcame her obstacles and learned to communicate, she was driven to accomplish her high goals. She garnered many achievements, but she also gave credit for her accomplishments to her supporters. The concluding paragraph of *The Story of My Life* recognizes the invaluable contributions her friends made to her extraordinary success.

Once Keller learned to communicate and to read, she was eager to learn to speak. When she heard about a blind-deaf Norwegian girl who had learned to speak, Keller recalls, "Mrs. Lamson had scarcely finished telling me about this girl's success before I was on fore with eagerness. I resolved that I, too, would learn to speak." Once she started lessons in speech, she worked on it constantly. In chapter thirteen she remembers,

My work was practice, practice, practice. Discouragement and weariness cast me down frequently; but the next moment the thought that I should soon be at home and show my loved ones what I had accomplished spurred me on, and I eagerly looked forward to their pleasure in my achievement.

At every educational level, Keller was urged on by her desire to excel. When she decided that she would go to college, she wanted to do it just like anyone else, not as a blind-deaf student. In chapter eighteen, she writes, "The thought of going to college took root in my heart and became an earnest desire, which impelled me to enter into a competi tion for a degree with seeing and hearing girls." She planned to attend college, but she did not want to go to a school for the deaf and blind. This proved to be more difficult than she imagined, but she accepted her struggles as challenges and found satisfaction in meeting them. Because Radcliffe College was not equipped to administer exams to a blind-deaf person, Keller had difficulties while taking her exams. Sullivan was not allowed to assist, so the faculty did the best they could. At the end of chapter nineteen, Keller remarks,

But I do not blame anyone. The administrative board of Radcliffe College did not realize how difficult they were making my examinations, nor did they understand the peculiar difficulties I had to surmount. But if they unintentionally placed obstacles in my way, I have the consolation of knowing that I overcame them all.

Education and Knowledge

Keller firmly believed in the power of education, both formal and informal. She found that she was delighted in the process of learning and that there was great value in acquiring knowledge in a variety of areas. In chapter four, after she made the mental connection between water and the letters that spelled it, she

knew then that 'w-a-t-e-r' meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away. I left the well-house eager to learn.

She continues in chapter five, "the more I handled things and learned their names and uses, the more joyous and confident grew my sense of kinship with the rest of the world." This ability to connect with the world is at the center of Keller's love of knowledge. After learning the meaning of love, for example, she comments in chapter six, "I felt that there were invisible lines stretched between my spirit and the spirits of others."

Sullivan taught Keller by taking her on trips where she could touch and feel what she was learning. Keller notes in chapter nine, "While we were in Boston we visited Bunker Hill, and there I had my first lesson in history. The story of the brave men who had fought on the spot where I stood excited me greatly." Of visiting Plymouth Rock she adds, "I could touch it, and perhaps that made the coming of the Pilgrims and their toils and great deeds seem more real to me." After visiting the World's Fair with Sullivan and Bell, Keller felt that the knowledge she gained had matured her:

All these experiences added a great many new terms to my vocabulary, and in the three weeks I spent at the Fair I took a long leap from the little child's interest in fairy tales and toys to the appreciation of the real and the earnest in the workaday world.

Keller delighted in taking the knowledge she gained from her studies with Sullivan and turning it over in her mind to create new thoughts and ideas. This is why she became more inquisitive as she advanced in her studies. In chapter seven, Keller describes the experience of having Sullivan read Oliver Wendell Holmes's poem "The Chambered Nautilus" to her and then demonstrating the process of building a shell. Keller takes this lesson and adds, "Just as the wonder-working mantle of the Nautilus changes the material it absorbs from the water andmakes it a part of itself, so the bits of knowledge one gathers undergo a similar change and become pearls of thought."

Nature

Throughout her early life, Keller took great pleasure in nature. She felt it, tasted it, and smelled it, and then imagined its sights and sounds. As she pursued her studies, one of her favorite subjects was physical geography because "it was a joy to learn the secrets of nature." Describing the experience of climbing a tree, she comments in chapter five,

"I sat there for a long, long time, feeling like a fairy on a rosy cloud. After that I spent many happy hours in my tree of paradise, thinking fair thoughts and dreaming bright dreams." Of experiencing an icy winter in the north, Keller remarks, "I recall my surprise on discovering that a mysterious hand had stripped the trees and bushes, leaving only here and there a wrinkled leaf. The birds had flown, and their empty nests in the bare trees were filed with snow." Keller loved to feel that she was interacting with creatures, as when she and Sullivan were walking to an outdoor spot to read. In chapter twenty-one, Keller describes this walk:

As we hastened through the long grass toward the hammock, the grasshoppers swarmed about us and fastened themselves on our clothes, and I remember that my teacher insisted upon picking them all off before we sat down, which seems to me an unnecessary waste of time.

Style

Formal Tone

Although Keller occasionally lapses into emotional passages, her writing style is generally formal. It is reminiscent of the lofty language of Greek writers and also of the similes and tones of biblical text. Toward the end of chapter two, for example, she writes, "Thus it is when we walk in the valley of twofold solitude we know little of the tender affections that grow out of endearing words and actions and companionship." At times, she makes direct allusions to biblical stories, as in chapter three: "Thus I came out of Egypt and stood before Sinai, and a power divine touched my spirit and gave it sight, so that I beheld many wonders." Recalling what it was like when she first learned to speak, Keller comments, "My soul, conscious of new strength, came out of bondage, and was reaching through those broken symbols of speech to all knowledge and all faith." Keller also uses allegorical images to convey her feelings, as when she refers to the "cup of bitterness" and the "angel of forgetfulness" in chapter thirteen. All of these examples demonstrate Keller's love of figurative language and controlled tone.

Given that Keller was an enthusiastic reader, her writing style may not be so surprising. While most people derive their sense of diction and syntax from interacting with the people around them, Keller was influenced by the writers whose books she read with such vigor. She read the Bible extensively in her youth and took a class at Radcliffe College called "Bible as English Literature" around the time she was writing *The Story of My Life*. That same semester, she took a class called "The Odes of Horace," which fed her deep love of classicism. In fact, she claimed that the *Iliad* "made Greece my paradise." These influences clearly play a strong role as Keller begins to develop her own writing style.

Affectionate Recollection

Despite the hardships Keller overcame, there is no sadness, self-pity, or bitterness in *The Story of My Life*. She willingly tells of her childhood fits and how angry she was at the time, but she relates these episodes with calm recollection. Her focus is on the people she loved and the wonderful experiences she had in the first twenty-two years of her life. She wistfully recalls moments spent in the orchard or up a tree. Remembering her summer at Cape Cod, she writes, "As I recall that visit North I am filled with wonder at the richness and variety of the experiences that cluster about it." She describes the beautiful scent of the outdoors and the tempting smells coming from the kitchen on Christmas. At the very beginning of the book, she comments, "When I try to classify my earliest impressions, I find that fact and fancy look alike across the years that link the past with the present. The woman paints the child's experiences in her own fantasy."

Keller is especially affectionate in her descriptions of Sullivan and the patience and creativity she exhibited in Keller's childhood. When Keller attended the Cambridge

School for Young Ladies in preparation for Radcliffe College, two members of the staff learned the manual alphabet in order to communicate directly with Keller. While Keller appreciated this, she missed Sullivan. Keller recalls, "But, though everybody was kind and ready to help us, there was only one hand that could turn drudgery into pleasure." Keller's admiration for Sullivan is clear in the following excerpt from chapter seven:

My teacher is so near to me that I scarcely think of myself apart from her. How much of my delight in all beautiful things is innate, and how much is due to her influence, I can never tell. I feel that her being is inseparable from my own, and that the footsteps of my life are in hers. All the best of me belongs to her there is not a talent or an inspiration or a joy in me that was not awakened by her loving touch.

Historical Context

Role of Women

When Keller wrote *The Story of My Life* she was not yet active in social reform. Still, her attendance at a college was an impressive feat for any woman at the time, and especially for a woman in Keller's special situation. Her determination to receive an education equal to that offered a man was set early in her life. She recalls in chapter eighteen, "When I was a little girl, I visited Wellesley and surprised my friends by the announcement, 'Someday I shall go to college□but I shall go to Harvard!' When asked why I would not go to Wellesley, I replied that there were only girls there."

Keller was deeply influenced by the intellectual and activist atmosphere of the progressive era in which she lived. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women were still limited in their ability to sign contracts, own land, vote, and work. At the turn of the century, women were demanding to be taken seriously in their pursuit of equal rights. Keller was one of the early feminists pursuing fairness for women.

Perception of the Physically Challenged

In 1903, when Keller published *The Story of My Life*, the public was indifferent to the needs of people who were physically challenged. Among those who had never dealt with such a challenge, there was usually ignorance and negative stereotyping. There were few specialized schools for instructing students who were blind and/or deaf. Often, deaf and blind people were institutionalized in mental asylums, where they neither belonged nor received any kind of education. After completing her degree, Keller set about informing the public about people like herself in hopes of helping people understand that people with disabilities are not so different from those without them. In fact, Keller's work in this area took her to Europe, Asia, South America, and Africa.

Beginning of Civil Rights Advocacy

When Keller was born in 1880, "Jim Crow" laws had just been declared unconstitutional by a Federal Circuit Court. These laws had kept segregation alive in the South, restricting African Americans from entering "white only" establishments, forcing them to drink from "colored only" water fountains, and generally keeping the two races as separate as possible. With the "Jim Crow" laws no longer in place, African Americans began to organize to win additional legal battles that would enable them to enjoy the same rights as other American citizens.

As with women's rights, Keller was one of the early proponents of civil rights. She was appalled that in the United States anyone would be denied their rights based on ethnicity or race. In chapter nine, she describes her childhood admiration for the

Pilgrims and early colonists, and she expresses her mixed feelings upon learning more about them. She writes,

I thought they desired the freedom of their fellow men as well as their own. I was keenly surprised and disappointed years later to learn of their acts of persecution that make us tingle with shame, even while we glory in the courage and energy that gave us our 'Country Beautiful.'

She wrote a letter to the president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1916, expressing her dismay at the current system and providing a monetary contribution.

Critical Overview

Written when Keller was only twenty-two years old, *The Story of My Life* reviews the author's early life. Critics were, and continue to be, impressed with the presentation of the story as well as with the inspiring content. Because Keller was a celebrity in her day, the autobiography caught the attention of readers and reviewers, who found the book satisfying and heartening. First published in 1903, the book is still in print. Some school teachers use the book as a way to teach perseverance and the importance of education, and instill a deeper appreciation of and compassion for the physically challenged.

Critics praise *The Story of My Life* as a book with a message. Keller showing that obstacles can be overcome, whether they are physical or social, continues to resonate with readers. In a review for *Booklist,* Nancy McCray praised a sound recording of the autobiography because "the tenacity of the deaf and blind woman is revealed." Critics such as Diane Schuur of *Time* further noted that Keller, in general, is a writer who speaks the "language of the sighted." Schuur added, "She proved how language could liberate the blind and the deaf.... With language, Keller, who could not hear and could not see, proved she could communicate in the world of sight and sound□and was able to speak to it and live in it."

While Keller's contemporaries almost unanimously praised the book, some of them raised concerns about the validity of the authorship. They believed that perhaps Sullivan and Macy actually wrote the book instead of Keller. Those who knew Keller personally found such doubts ridiculous because Keller was such an eloquent speaker and writer and was perfectly capable of expressing her thoughts and opinions. No evidence was ever offered that proved that Keller did not write her autobiography.

A negative criticism of the book is directed at Keller's life rather than at the literary merits of the autobiography□that Sullivan sacrificed her entire life for the sake of her student strikes some reviewers as unhealthy. Walter Kendrick of the *New York Times Book Review* cited an anonymous review of the autobiography: "The wonderful feat of drawing Helen Keller out of her hopeless darkness was only accomplished by sacrificing for it another woman's whole life." Scholars familiar with Sullivan's life story note that her marriage to John Albert Macy eventually ended because Keller was too much a part of their lives.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Bussey holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, she examines Helen Keller's rather surprising use of sense references and imagery throughout The Story of My Life.

Helen Keller is regarded as a heroic figure who overcame extreme hardship to accomplish impressive goals, both personally and publicly. At the age of nineteen months, she fell ill with a fever that left her blind and deaf. Despite her early plunge into silence and darkness, Keller was able to learn to read and speak as a result of her personal persistence and the hard work of her teacher, Anne Sullivan. Even as a child, Keller craved communication with the world and longed to feel connected to others. She then took her ability to communicate and pursued a career as a lecturer and writer, tirelessly advocating social reform for the physically challenged, women, and minorities. What is so surprising about her eloquent words is her frequent references to sight and sound. In *The Story of My Life* she recounts her experiences, often with sensory descriptions that do not seem possible given her complete reliance on smell, taste, and, most importantly, touch. This essay will review some of these descriptions and then offer several possible explanations for Keller's ability to write such vibrant passages.

Keller felt a deep bond with nature and turned to it as a source of comfort and learning. In her autobiography, she frequently writes about nature, and this is the subject matter for some of her most moving sensory images. Her ability to describe nature this way appears as early as the first chapter, in which she explains that beside the house where she lived when she was very young was a servant's house that was covered in vines. She remarks, "From the garden it looked like an arbor. The little porch was hidden from view by a screen of yellow roses and Southern smilax. It was the favorite haunt of hummingbirds and bees." Although this memory predates her loss of sight and hearing, it seems amazing that a young child would perceive and remember the sight of the servant's house in such detail.

Interestingly, the next paragraph offers an extended description of her house as she remembers it after her illness but before Anne Sullivan arrived. This passage is almost exclusively related in terms of touch and smell. She writes,

Even in the days before my teacher came, I used to feel along the square stiff boxwood hedges, and, guided by the sense of smell, would find the first violets and lilies. There, too, after a fit of temper, I went to find comfort and to hide my hot face in the cool leaves and grass.

She adds that the roses filled "the whole air with their fragrance, untainted by any earthy smell; and in the early morning, washed in the dew, they felt so soft, so pure."

By the events of chapter five, Keller had begun studying with Sullivan, and she offers this description of a mimosa tree: "Yes, there it was, all quivering in the warm sunshine,

its blossom-laden branches almost touching the long grass. Was there ever anything so exquisitely beautiful in the world before!"

These three passages offer an important insight. The first two provide descriptions of houses as Keller remembers them before she began to study with Sullivan, but because the first one is a memory from before her illness, she consciously uses sight words. In the second passage, she intentionally mentions that this is a memory from before Sullivan arrived, and the descriptions center on touch and smell. In the third passage, she offers a very visual description of a tree and marvels at its physical beauty. In Keller's mind, it seems, there was a measurable span of time between the onset of her blindness and deafness, and the time Sullivan opened the world back up for her. During that period, her sensory abilities were noticeably limited, but before and after, she seems to have functioned with all five senses intact.

The need to communicate with others was the driving force behind Keller's determination to understand language. In an early memory, before she began studying with Sullivan, she recalls loving Christmas, not for the gifts, but for the holiday preparations and the wonderful smells in the house. She took pleasure in being treated to "tidbits" from the kitchen and in being allowed to participate in the festivities. In this example, she unites the memory of the smells and the tastes of Christmas with being a part of the family's holiday cheer. Later, after having studied a variety of subjects with Sullivan, she recalls being invited by the town schoolchildren to their Christmas party. She describes the tree in chapter eight: "In the center of the schoolroom stood a beautiful tree ablaze and shimmering in the soft light, its branches loaded with strange, wonderful fruit. It was a moment of supreme happiness." Again, her early memory centers on her limited sensory abilities, while the later memory is related as if her eyesight were returned. In both passages, however, her delight comes not from the smells, tastes, and sights themselves, but from the experience of being included in important events of the world with which she longed to connect. Her dazzling description of the Christmas tree in the second passage could be the result of her imagination, her understanding of what Christmas trees looked like, or of hearing others describe the tree. In any case, it was an intense experience that she felt could best be described by calling on visual imagery.

In certain cases, Keller's descriptions seem to come from her imagining sights based on a variety of other sources of information. In chapter twelve, for example, she has her first experience with a true winter, complete with snow and icicles. She recalls,

The trees stood motionless and white like figures in a marble frieze. There was no odor of pine needles. The rays of the sun fell upon the trees, so that the twigs sparkled like diamonds and dropped showers when we touched them. So dazzling was the light, it penetrated even the darkness that veils my eyes.

In this passage, the reader can understand how Keller has comprehended such a breathtakingly visual scene. She would know that the trees were motionless because she would feel complete stillness in the air. She likens the trees to a marble frieze, which is a three-dimensional mural, a form of art accessible by touch. In fact, based on

what she tells the reader about her education, there is a very good chance she would have felt a frieze before. Her use of the word "frieze" is fitting, as it is a homophone for the word "freeze." Keller was an avid reader who was skilled at literature and composition, so there is good reason to believe she intentionally used this word.

Next, she mentions that there is no odor of pine needles, which would have given her the impression that she was not in lush surroundings. She would have felt the "rays of the sun" and she says she felt the melting snow falling from twigs when she touched them. By this time, Keller was far enough along in her education to understand the concept of melting ice, so she understood what was happening in the trees. In addition, she mentions "we," meaning that someone else (probably Sullivan) was there, which could account for the beautiful imagery of the twigs sparkling like diamonds and the dazzlingly white light. In her book, Keller never mentions whether she had any visual ability at all. Some people who are legally blind are still able to see to a very limited degree. If Keller had any vision at all, she most certainly would have been able to detectthe brightness of light reflecting off a snowy expanse. By evaluating this passage in depth, the reader understands how, in some cases, Keller was able to provide such beautiful visual descriptions of scenes she could not possibly have seen.

There are a number of ways to explain Keller's ability to smoothly incorporate sight and sound imagery in her story. Perhaps her other senses are so honed that she is able to piece together the information she would normally receive from her eyes and ears. Perhaps the early examples are the product of her memory, which had only nineteen months to store visual information, so these memories did not fade. Perhaps, in retrospect, Keller superimposes descriptions she has learned from reading and interacting with people over the years. After all, Sullivan was her constant companion, spelling out everything into Keller's curious hands. The answer probably lies somewhere at the crossroads of all of these factors.

Keller's frequent sensory images bring her autobiography to life in such a way that many readers may not even notice that the blind-deaf author is using surprising descriptions. Because readers are so accustomed to this type of language, the book reads the same as any other life story. By reading the text with a heightened awareness of the author's unique situation, however, the reader gains an even greater appreciation for her sophisticated communicative abilities.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on *The Story of My Life,* in *Nonfiction Classics for Students*, The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Kattelman is a freelance writer who specializes in writing about the arts. In this essay, she considers the poetic elements present in Keller's autobiography.

In *The Story of My Life* Helen Keller recounts her early experiences of being awakened to a world of words and concepts through the brilliant teaching methods of her tutor and constant companion, Anne Sullivan. She carefully retraces the moments when she first connected a word with the physical object it represents (water) and continues on to describe how she gradually built up a vocabulary and an understanding of not only a physical world, but also a world of intangible concepts, ideas, images and emotions. Keller connected to the world through the words that were spelled into her hand, and it was these words that sparked an understanding of human existence. By realizing that words could be puttogether to evoke mental images, Keller suddenly began to grasp concepts and ideas of things that she could not physically smell or touch. She began to understand and explore how words could be used to represent emotions and how experiences could be described through simile and metaphor. Keller began to understand the *poetry* of the world. Thus, it is not surprising that Keller's autobiography is much more than a traditional linear narrative of a life story. It is also a poetic work.

In *The Story of My Life*, Keller does much more than recount the chronological events of her life. Through her use of poetic language, she also gives the reader a rich sense of her unique experience of the world. The language Keller uses is as important to the story as the events that took place. Due to her poetic, descriptive writing, Keller is able to really share her world, and the reader is able to experience what it might be like to live as someone who is bereft of both sight and sound.

There are several examples of this rich poetic description throughout *The Story of My Life*. One early example is found in a passage in which Keller, with the use of a metaphor, describes her life before her education began:

Have you ever been at sea in a dense fog, when it seemed as if a tangible white darkness shut you in and the great ship, tense and anxious, groped her way toward the shore with plummet and sounding-line and you waited with beating heart for something to happen?

Here the use of metaphor creates a strong picture of the anticipation and isolation Keller felt. It is much more effective than a straightforward description might have been. By comparing her experience to being lost at sea Keller creates a rich visual image for the reader. The metaphor helps one to connect with the experience emotionally, something a factual, objective retelling would not do.

Another early example of Keller's use of metaphor and poetic imagery occurs as she describes the roses that surrounded her childhood home:

Never have I found in the greenhouses of the North such heart-satisfying roses as the climbing roses of my southern home. They used to hang in long festoons from our porch, filling the whole air with fragrance, untainted by any earthy smell; and in the early morning, washed in the dew, they felt so soft, so pure, I could not help wondering if they did not resemble the asphodels of God's garden.

Here Keller uses the senses of smell and touch as a springboard to convey not only the physical impression of these roses, but also the awe and inspiration they invoked in her. Even though she does not actually tell the reader what the roses look like, it is possible to "see" them due to Keller's evocative, poetic use of language.

A poet takes individual words and combines them to create associations that convey much more than the actual words themselves. This is what Keller does. One particularly striking passage occurs in chapter twenty of *The Story of My Life* as Keller speaks of her struggle to gain knowledge. In this passage Keller again uses metaphor to enhance her description:

Everyone who wishes to gain true knowledge must climb the Hill Difficulty alone, and since there is no royal road to the summit, I must zigzag it in my own way. I slip back many times, I fall, I stand still, I run against the edge of hidden obstacles, I lose my temper and find it again and keep it better, I trudge on, I gain a little, I feel encouraged, I get more eager and climb higher and begin to see the widening horizon. Every struggle is a victory. One more effort and I reach the luminous cloud, the blue depths of the sky, the uplands of my desire.

The passage evokes much more than a generic desire to know. It provides real insight into the personality of Keller. This metaphor of her climbing up the "Hill Difficulty" gives the reader a rich experience of Keller's inner struggles and of her persistence in the face of adversity.

It is not surprising that Helen Keller developed a strong poetic style in her writing. She was imitating what she had been taught. Her teacher, Anne Sullivan believed in the power of words and emphasized them in every phase of Helen's teaching. Sullivan realized that words could provide the keys that could open doors for Helen. In one of the letters printed in the supplementary material to *The Story of My Life,* Anne Sullivan relates how she came upon the realization of the importance of vocabulary to a child's learning process. One day when she was in the garden observing Keller's fifteen-month-old cousin, Sullivan experienced a revelation:

I asked myself, 'How does a normal child learn language?' The answer was simple, 'By imitation.' The child comes into the world with the ability to learn, and he learns of himself, provided he is supplied with sufficient outward stimulus. He sees people do things, and he tries to do them. He hears others speak, and he tried (sic) to speak. But long before he utters his first word he understands what is said to him.... These observations have given me a clue to the method to be followed in teaching Helen language. I shall talk into her hand as we talk into the baby' s ears. I shall assume that she has the normal child's capacity of assimilation and imitation. I shall use complete

sentences in talking to her, and fill out the meaning with gestures and her descriptive signs when necessity requires it; but I shall not try to keep her mind fixed on any one thing. I shall do all I can to interest and stimulate it, and wait for results.

From then on, Sullivan immersed Keller in a world of words. She would constantly spell into the young girl's hand, and Keller's vocabulary quickly grew. Keller had a keen memory and was able to retain many of the words Sullivan passed along. Sullivan also introduced Keller to the works of many of the great poets including Shakespeare, Homer and Wordsworth. She would not only use poetry as a subject to be studied in and of itself, but would use it to emphasize lessons in Keller's other areas of study. As Keller notes, "Everything Miss Sullivan taught me she illustrated by a beautiful story or a poem." With so much early exposure to poetry, it is not surprising that Keller developed a poetic style in her own writing. A child learns by imitation, and so, when Keller began to write, she imitated the beautiful language that had been used to teach her.

People frequently have wondered how Keller could have any notion of things that she could not see or hear. As Ralph Barton Perry explains in the introduction to *The Story of My Life*, there are many different ways to experience the world and the absence of one or two senses does not close off a person's ability to know the things around them,

In practice we deal not with sensory signals themselves but with the *things* they signalize; and these can be the same whether signalized by visual and auditory data or, as with Miss Keller, by motor, tactile, vibratory, and olfactory data.

In other words, Helen Keller used the senses she did have to fill in the gaps for those she lacked. Keller even created color in her world by associating tactile sensations and the emotions each color might produce. In *Midstream, My Later Life,* her second autobiography, she describes this process:

I put more thought and feeling into my senses; I examined as I had not before my impressions arising from touch and smell, and was amazed at the ideas with which they supplied me, and the clues they gave me to the world of sight and hearing. For example, I observed the kinds and degrees of fragrance which gave me pleasure, and that enabled me to imagine how the seeing eye is charmed by different colours and their shades.

There have been numerous books written about what makes a written piece a poem. Often the form and structure are the main focus. However, in *Fooling With Words* poet Coleman Barks tells Bill Moyers that he believes writing does not have to conform to a particular structure in order to be considered a poem: "I don't want to get too solemn about the terms *form* and *poem*. If [a piece] has soundwork going on and if it resonates in your body, I'd say it's close to poetry." Here Burke notes that what turns writing into poetry is the physical or emotional sensation it evokes. If one accepts Burke's definition, then *The Story of My Life* can definitely be considered poetry because in it Keller evokes many sensations with her words. Even though the passages do not contain standard meter and the words do not rhyme, they are poetry just the same. Keller's writing in *The Story of My Life* speaks to the senses, not to the intellect.

Reading *The Story of My Life* as poetry opens up a new understanding of Keller's world and of the unlimited possibility of the mind. Although unable to hear or see, Keller, very giftedly, associated with life's sights and sounds, as well as its textures, tastes, and smells. She was also very gifted in her ability to use language that allows readers to live in her world for a brief time and experience the word-images that played across her mind. Readers are fortunate that she was able to share these gifts with the world. While the story of Keller's early days would be worthwhile reading no matter what the writing style, Keller provides the reader an added pleasure. Keller is not only able to convey *what* happened to her as a child, but through her brilliant use of language she also gives the reader a sense of *how* it happened. *The Story of My Life* is a beautiful example of poetic writing that also happens to outline the life of a courageous and creative wordsmith.

Source: Beth Kattelman, Critical Essay on *The Story of My Life,* in *Nonfiction Classics for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Thompson is a freelance writer who writes primarily in the education field. In this essay, she heralds Keller's autobiography as a work that is exemplary on three counts: its fascinating subject, its beautiful prose, and its thought-provoking nature.

A book is a strange object. It is inanimate, of course, but not permanently so. Anyone who reads with passion knows that the moment a book is read, it ceases to be an inanimate "thing" and becomes instead an animated source of fascination, pleasure, and/or knowledge. Had Dr. Frankenstein not been so insanely obsessed with bringing the human form back to life, he might have satisfied his creative and procreative urges by reading books.

The paradox is that the book cannot come alive until it is read, so it has no ability of its own to entice a reader to open it. Someone must speak for a book. Publishing companies spend millions upon millions to advertise books, to design appealing covers and artwork, and to acquire celebrity endorsements. However, most books that arouse passion do not reach readers as the result of advertising campaigns. Most of them come to the attention in one of two ways: an acquaintance suggests a book either directly or indirectly, or the book is assigned for an educational purpose. Upon reading, some of these books become favorites because of their story, their style, or their ability to stimulate the mind. *The Story of My Life* hits all three of these marks. It is fascinating in its subject, beautiful in its writing, and thought-provoking in its nature.

Helen Keller was a woman whom adjectives fail to describe. *Extraordinary, remarkable,* and even *brilliant* are inadequate. Was she extraordinary? Certainly. Without question she was the most educated deaf and blind woman of her time. Remarkable? Schools continue to offer Helen Keller's life story to students through pages and plays, and television and movie producers continue to offer updated versions of her life. She counted among her intimate friends Alexander Graham Bell, Mark Twain, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Edward Everett Hale, several famous actors and actresses, and church notables. Most of them proclaimed themselves to be admirers of hers.

Was Helen Keller brilliant? A consideration of her accomplishments seems to prove so. Before the onset of her illness, she demonstrated signs of being exceptional. At six months she mimicked short, functional sentences such as "How d'ye?" She could speak several words, including "tea" and "water" quite plainly. After her illness, Keller could no longer see or hear. Many of the words she had previously spoken became lost or distorted through lack of hearing them. After five years of existing in a womblike world of silence and darkness, Keller was reintroduced to language thanks to her gifted teacher, Anne Sullivan. Concerning that moment of recognition when words were returned to her, Keller wrote, "I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten-a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me." From that moment on she demanded the word for every object in her world.

Keller soon began the complex task of learning the meanings of abstract words and idioms, learning to use words in sentences, and ultimately, learning to participate in conversation. These tasks present extreme difficulty for deaf children because, as Keller explains:

The deaf child does not learn in a month, or even in two or three years, the numberless idioms and expressions used in the simplest daily intercourse. The little hearing child learns these from constant repetition and imitation. The conversation he hears in his home stimulates his mind and suggests topics and calls forth the spontaneous expression of his own thoughts. This natural exchange of ideas is denied to the deaf child.

In spite of extreme difficulty, Keller mastered each of these tasks. Early in her education, Keller communicated exclusively through the manual alphabet, but she was not satisfied. She wanted to speak, and so she began the work of acquiring speech. Miss Sarah Fuller, Keller's speech teacher, would pass her pupil's fingers lightly over her own face so that Helen could feel the position of her tongue and lips as she made a sound. Additionally, Keller would feel a speaker's throat for the particular vibration of a sound and discern the expression of the face through touch. Over the course of many years, she learned to speak well enough that those outside her immediate circle could understand her. She also learned correct pronunciations and how to phrase and inflect from reading aloud to Miss Sullivan. Eventually, she learned to speak not only English, but also French, Latin, and German.

One final example of Helen Keller's rare intellect comes from her college-preparatory years. While preparing for Radcliffe, she studied English literature and composition, Greek and Roman history, German, Latin, and arithmetic. Often the texts Keller needed had not yet been embossed, so she had to "carry in her mind" the information that other students could see upon the chalkboard or on the pages. She crafted geometric designs in wire upon a cushion, and had to memorize the lettering of the figures and all other important information.

Her attainments through formal education alone do not cover the scope of Helen Keller's brilliance. She enjoyed physically and mentally taxing activities such as riding her tandem bicycle, rowing either alone or accompanied, and playing chess and checkers. The only concessions made to her in games of chess and checkers were that game pieces were constructed so that she could differentiate between colors by feel. Somehow she managed to "see" the arrangement of the board by passing her hands lightly over the pieces.

Her awesome intelligence was complemented by her finely tuned sense of humor. She had the enviable gift of being able to laugh with others, even when she was the butt of the joke. She loved young children, who loved her in turn, and they often dissolved into giggles at her "blunders." When Helen Keller was young she had a doll named Nancy that was made of towels. Keller wrote that Nancy was "covered with dirt□the remains of mud pies I had compelled her to eat, although she had never shown any special liking for them." Keller's account of the agony students go through when taking exams should

be required reading for every student about to submit himself or herself to an academic test. Her description of test anxiety will induce laughter and reduce tension. Her proclamation that "the divine right of professors to ask questions without the consent of the questioned should be abolished" will inspire schemes designed to bring about just such an abolition.

Those unimpressed or uninspired by the accomplishments chronicled in this work can still find much to admire. The writing is flawlessly beautiful. To a large extent, the prose imitates great classical works. Rhythms, imagery, and allusions from the Bible flow throughout. During the first springtime that Keller spent with Miss Sullivan, she learned about the beauties of nature. She described the lesson this way: "I learned how the sun and the rain make to grow out of the ground every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, how birds build their nests and live and thrive from land to land, how the squirrel, the deer, the lion and every other creature finds food and shelter." This passage sounds much like the creation story in Genesis. In other places, Keller used allusions to the Bible to bring alive her analogies. About the arrival of her teacher, Anne Sullivan, into her life, Helen Keller said, "Thus I came up out of Egypt and stood before Sinai, and a power divine touched my spirit and gave it sight, so that I beheld many wonders. And from the sacred mountain I heard a voice which said, 'Knowledge is love and light and vision.'"

It is not difficult to believe that Helen Keller wrote easily and beautifully in the style of the classics that she devoured as a child. It is, however, difficult to accept that her descriptions of the beauty around her were her own and not the borrowed imagery of poets or sighted friends. In her autobiography, she described a lily this way:

The slender, fingerlike leaves on the outside opened slowly, reluctant, I thought, to reveal the loveliness they hid; once having made a start, however, the opening process went on rapidly, but in order and systematically. There was always one bud larger and more beautiful than the rest, which pushed her outer covering back with more pomp, as if the beauty in soft, silky robes knew that she was the lily-queen by right divine, while her timid sisters doffed their green hoods shyly, until the whole plant was one nodding bough of loveliness and fragrance.

How could Helen Keller, blind from the age of one, have written so descriptively? If one can move beyond initial incredulity and consider the circumstances, one can understand how Keller's powers of description developed so superbly. Sometimes sighted writers become lazy and employ trite or vague similes. The explanation for this is that writers often rely on their sighted readers to have prior knowledge of what is being described and to fill in the blanks. For example, a writer might describe a rotund, white-haired, bewhiskered man as looking like Santa Claus, or a calm lake as looking like polished glass. The writer expects the reader to know what Santa Clause and polished glass look like and apply that knowledge to the current circumstance. Understandably, Helen Keller never slipped into this trap of lazy writing. She received many of her descriptions from people who knew they were describing a scene to someone who had never viewed the scene or another like it, and they described the scene accordingly. Thus, when Helen Keller related scenes at a later time, she relayed full information, never taking for

granted that her readers had seen the same sight for themselves. This explains the beauty of her description of the lily. Perhaps someone once described for Keller the sight of young maidens doffing their hoods shyly or regal young women of social standing parading proudly as with divine right, but it was Helen Keller that juxtaposed the descriptions onto the lily, and the result is an example of description from which poets could learn.

Adding to Keller's amazing gift for description is that she often took in information through senses other than sight, the sense that so many sighted persons rely on almost exclusively in description. Keller's descriptions are full of the feel, smell, and taste of things. In her description of the blooming lily, she talks of the "slender, fingerlike leaves." This is not a brilliant description, but many writers would leave their description at this and congratulate themselves. Keller continues with bold action words, "pushed" and "doffed" and "nodding" and texture words like "soft" and "silky," descriptions that she literally *felt* from the blooming plant. The lily is not just beautiful, but fragrant, a fact many writers might forget to mention though it is of chief importance in describing a flower.

This partial autobiography□it was written when Helen Keller was in her early twenties□not only fascinates and entertains, it also educates. It educates in the manner of Socrates by causing the reader to consider question upon question. Consider some of these: Helen Keller clearly possessed an innate genius, and despite her physical disabilities, her genius was allowed to grow because it was nurtured by great teachers and supported by financial and social privilege. How many people have lived and died in poverty and isolation whose genius might have cured diseases, ended hunger, or engineered world peace? Helen Keller did not begin any type of formal schooling until she was seven. She progressed at phenomenal speed, full of natural curiosity and a desire to learn. Is formal education pressed upon children too early in the United States? Helen Keller overcame the most serious disabilities a student can overcome. Her workload was grueling, her spirit inexhaustible. She regularly spent many times the hours on assignments that her classmates did. Does this suggest anything about the way special education programs modify expectations for students with disabilities? Clearly, Helen Keller's greatest teacher was Anne Sullivan. Following behind Miss Sullivan in terms of effectiveness were the teachers who voluntarily provided Keller with extra, individual tutoring. This suggests something about current educational standards. Experts know that low student-to-teacher ratios work best; should communities continue to accept growing class sizes and fewer qualified teachers? And a final question, one that addresses the very core of education and knowledge acquisition: Is there thought without words? Helen Keller made the following remark about a sensation she felt when she had just begun to work with Anne Sullivan, before she had associated the manual alphabet with words or words with objects: "This thought, if a wordless sensation may be called a thought, made me hop and skip with pleasure." Later, when she understood that words described the concrete and abstract world, she said, "Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought." Consider this question in light of human tribes that have no word for "war." Do they have no word for war because they have never fought one? Or have they never fought a war because the abstract thought has no word to call it into reality?

These questions will not go unanswered. Many different people will answer them many times in many different ways. That is unimportant. What is important is that the world is graced with people whose lives and words raise the important questions. Helen Keller was one such person. She taught those who treat themselves to this story how courage, desire, perseverance, and love know no boundaries. She did this by sharing not merely one of the elements that makes a great book, but three: She told a singularly inspiring and fascinating story, she wrote her story in beautiful prose, and she gave rise to a host of relevant thoughts and questions.

Source: Karen D. Thompson, Critical Essay on *The Story of My Life,* in *Nonfiction Classics for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Adaptations

Keller's life is the basis of William Gibson's play *The Miracle Worker,* which includes many of the events of Keller's life as portrayed in *The Story of My Life*. The play was successful on the stage and was adapted to film in 1962, produced by Playfilm Productions and starring Anne Bancroft as Sullivan and Patty Duke as Keller. For their performances in the 1962 film version, Bancroft and Duke won Academy Awards for Best Actress and Best Supporting Actress, respectively. In 1970, a film called *Helen Keller and Her Teacher* was produced by Jerome Kurtz and Jesse Sandler.

The Miracle Worker has also been filmed for television. In 1979, the film was made starring Patty Duke as Sullivan and Melissa Gilbert as Keller. A newer version was broadcast in 2001, starring Hallie Kate Eisenberg as Keller and Alison Elliott as Sullivan.

A documentary featuring Keller herself was produced by Nancy Hamilton Presentation in 1956, titled *Helen Keller in Her Story*. The film won the Academy Award for Best Feature Documentary.

Topics for Further Study

If you had to choose between losing your sight or your hearing, which one would you choose? Take into account your present interests, future interests, ability to communicate, and society's perceptions of people with these challenges. Compose an essay in which you explain your decision. Add a paragraph explaining what, if any, effect this exercise has on you.

Find a partner and learn the first five letters of the manual alphabet. Then put on a blindfold and earplugs of some kind and have your partner take you to a room that is unfamiliar to you. How do you feel in this strange environment without the benefit of seeing or hearing? Once you have explored the room a little, sit down with your partner and have him or her spell words in your hand using the letters you have learned (bed, bad, cab, bead, ace, deed, etc.). How many words were you able to understand? After you have done all this, trade roles so that your partner wears the blindfold and earplugs.

Research Louis Braille to find out why he created his unique system that allows the blind to read. What five adjectives would you use to describe him?

In *The Story of My Life* Keller writes, "It was the Iliad that made Greece my paradise," and later, "A medallion of Homer hangs on the wall of my study." Read the first chapter of the *Iliad*. Bear in mind that Homer was blind as you read the passages. Prepare a brief lesson explaining why you think this book was so compelling to Keller. Look for elements, phrases, and features that are perhaps surprising coming from a blind poet and try to account for them.

Suppose your family has enrolled into a "student exchange" type of program and offered to sponsor a blind and deaf person with Keller's communicative skills for one year. Plan how you will help this student learn the subjects you are currently studying. Think about the education Keller received. Her travels, experiences with things such as the World's Fair, and interactions with remarkable people all helped her learn more than she could have learned from a textbook. What field trips could you plan in your area? Are there any specialized museums or similar exhibits you think would be appropriate? Document your lesson plans, including at least one activity for each of your subjects.

Compare and Contrast

Early Twentieth Century: Educational opportunities for the blind and deaf are extremely limited. There are very few schools to teach children with these needs, and in many cases the blind and deaf are sent to mental asylums. Public sentiment toward the blind and deaf is negative and uneducated.

Today: There are numerous schools across the country specializing in instructing students with these needs, and many children who are blind or deaf learn to function in public schools. Laws require that the handicapped be accommodated and that employers offer equal opportunities to prospective employees, regardless of physical challenges.

Early Twentieth Century: In 1900, Keller begins her college studies at Radcliffe. Her first-year courses are French, German History, English composition, and English literature.

Today: While freshman courses vary from college to college, most students take four or five courses per semester. These courses often include American or world history, English literature, a math course, a science course, and a foreign language. In some universities, first-year students study economics, philosophy, psychology, or theology.

Early Twentieth Century: Women are not encouraged to pursue education because college degrees have little relevance to women's roles as wives and mothers. Generally, when women do pursue higher education, they do so at schools for women.

Today: Almost all colleges and universities offer enrollment for men and women alike, and strive to maintain a balance in their student bodies.

What Do I Read Next?

Dorothy Hermann's acclaimed biography, *Helen Keller: A Life* (1998), complements *The Story of My Life* in its thorough and objective portrayals of Keller and Sullivan. Hermann depicts Helen as she was in private as well as in public, and she explores the complicated relationship between the student and her teacher.

Keller's autobiographical follow-up to *The Story of My Life is Midstream, My Later Life* (1929, 1968). Here, Keller tells about the twenty-five years after she graduated from Radcliffe College, including the people she met and her extensive work for social reform.

In *Helen and Teacher: The Story of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan Macy* (1997), Joseph P. Lash reviews the events of Anne Sullivan's life prior to and after meeting Helen Keller, along with the background of Keller herself. He shows how these two extraordinary lives joined to make great things happen.

Margaret Marshall Saunders was a contemporary of Keller who wrote on behalf of child and animal welfare. Her best-known book, *Beautiful Joe: The Autobiography of a Dog* (1893), is about a mistreated dog that finds a loving home.

Further Study

Einhorn, Lois J., *Helen Keller, Public Speaker: Sightless but Seen, Deaf but Heard,* Greenwood Press, 1998.

Einhorn provides an in-depth study of Keller's career as a lecturer and public speaker. The author examines Keller's ability to communicate, while offering analysis and texts of Keller's wide-ranging speeches.

Gitter, Elisabeth, *The Imprisoned Guest: Samuel Howe and Laura Bridgman, the Original Deaf-Blind Girl,* Farrar Straus &Giroux, 2001.

Gitter's book tells the compelling story of Dr. Howe, the man who devised the system of communicating to the deaf-blind by using the manual alphabet in their hands. His original student, Laura Bridgman, was a great inspiration to Helen Keller.

Hickok, Lorena A., *Touch of Magic: The Story of HelenKeller's Great Teacher, Anne Sullivan Macy,* Dodd, 1961.

For students interested in how Sullivan came to be the kind of person and teacher she was, this biography provides her background.

Steinem, Gloria, *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions,* Holt, 1983.

In this book Steinem, arguably the foremost feminist of modern times, provides an overview of the views that made her so prominent in the women's movement. The topics are sometimes public and sometimes personal, ranging from politics to Marilyn Monroe.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Nonfiction Classics for Students (NCfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NCfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on

□classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NCfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NCfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NCfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NCfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NCfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Nonfiction Classics for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Nonfiction Classics for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Nonfiction Classics for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NCfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NCfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NCfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Nonfiction Classics for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NCfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Nonfiction Classics for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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