

Miracle Worker - Act One

Focus

The experience of drama is different from other forms of literature. Short stories, novels, poetry, and non-fiction prose are meant to be *read*, generally to oneself, often when we are alone. Occasionally, as well, we may read aloud to others. Although authors make public appearances and read their works aloud to small audiences that have gathered for that purpose, and public story telling has achieved renewed popularity, reading literature is usually a private, solitary activity. **We most often experience plays, however, through their live performance.**

Likely, you have seen or performed in plays. As a member of the audience, you have watched the actors, laughed or marveled at the costumes, sat in hushed quiet as the curtain went up, and been captivated by the total effect of scenery, lights, music, sound effects, and props. Lighting is a particularly interesting area of stagecraft, used beautifully and significantly in “The Miracle Worker.”

Notice

How did William Gibson create this script? The play is biographical, but nonetheless the dialogue is completely invented. Try to recall a conversation you had just yesterday, for example; you will see that it is impossible to remember it **verbatim** (word for word). Gibson can only have guessed at the scenes. The characterizations are re-creations, based on descriptions of people that lived decades ago. Notice, as you read, how Captain Keller, Helen's father, emerges: deeply caring, with tight reins on his family, and stubborn, irascible, bombastic—even comic at times. Was the real Keller this way? Does it matter? As the character has been constructed by Gibson, Keller adds an absolutely essential tension to the drama: He is a source of conflict and suspense. Will his irritation with Helen overwhelm his love for her? Will he send her away? Will he allow Annie Sullivan to press forward?

As you read the play, pay attention to the playwright's stage directions. These give you a picture of the action and the setting. Think about the function of lighting in each scene. Furthermore, William Gibson gives important clues in the stage directions. Locations and objects have a **literal** function, but they may also take on **symbolic** meaning and point to the climax and theme of the play.

The play is driven by conflict. The conflict creates a past for the characters, a present social dynamic between them, and also generates suspense that points towards the future. How will things turn out? Who are the characters in the play who threaten Helen?

See Vocabulary on page 351



The Miracle Worker



William Gibson

CAST

A Doctor

Kate

Helen's mother

Arthur Keller

Helen's father

Helen

Martha

Servant's nine-year-old child

Percy

Servant's seven-year-old child

Aunt Ev

Helen's aunt

James

Helen's older half-brother

Anagnos *Administrator, Perkins Institute*

Annie Sullivan

Helen's teacher

Viney

Servant

Blind Girls

A Servant

Offstage Voices

TIME

The 1880's

PLACE

In and around the Keller homestead in Tuscumbia, Alabama; also, briefly the Perkins Institution for the Blind, in Boston.



Act One

Scene I

It is night over the Keller homestead. Inside, three adults in the bedroom are grouped around a crib, in lamplight. They have been through a long vigil, and it shows in their tired bearing and disarranged clothing. One is a young gentlewoman with a kind girlish face, KATE KELLER; the second is an elderly DOCTOR, stethoscope at neck, thermometer in fingers; the third is a hearty gentleman in his forties with chin whiskers, CAPTAIN ARTHUR KELLER.

DOCTOR. She'll live.

KATE. Thank G-d.

(The DOCTOR leaves them together over the crib, packs his bag.)

DOCTOR. You're a pair of lucky parents. I can tell you now, I thought she wouldn't.

KELLER. Nonsense, the child's a Keller, she has the constitution of a goat. She'll outlive us all.

DOCTOR (*amiably*).¹ Yes, especially if some of you Kellers don't get a night's sleep. I mean you, Mrs. Keller.

KELLER. You hear, Katie?

KATE. I hear.

KELLER (*indulgent*).² I've brought up two of them, but this is my wife's first, she isn't battle-scarred yet.

KATE. Doctor, don't be merely considerate, will my girl be all right?

1. **amiably** (AIM ee uh blee): in a friendly manner.

2. **indulgent** (in DULL jint): kind or lenient, often to excess.

DOCTOR. Oh, by morning she'll be knocking down Captain Keller's fences again.

KATE. And isn't there anything we should do?

KELLER (*joyful*). Put up stronger fencing, ha?

DOCTOR. Just let her get well, she knows how to do it better than we do.

(*He is packed, ready to leave.*)

Main thing is the fever's gone, these things come and go in infants, never know why. Call it acute congestion of the stomach and brain.

KELLER. I'll see you to your buggy, Doctor.

DOCTOR. I've never seen a baby, more vitality, that's the truth.

(*He beams a good night at the baby and KATE, and KELLER leads him downstairs with a lamp. They go down the porch steps, and across the yard, where the DOCTOR goes off left; KELLER stands with the lamp aloft. KATE meanwhile is bent lovingly over the crib, which emits a bleat; her finger is playful with the baby's face.*)

KATE. Hush. Don't you cry now, you've been trouble enough. Call it acute congestion, indeed, I don't see what's so cute about congestion, just because it's yours. We'll have your father run an editorial in his paper, the wonders of modern medicine, they don't know what they're curing even when they cure it. Men, men and their battle scars, we women will have to—

(*But she breaks off, puzzled, moves her finger before the baby's eyes.*)

Will have to—Helen?

(*Now she moves her hand, quickly.*)

Helen.

(*She snaps her fingers at the baby's eyes twice and her hand falters; after a moment she calls out, loudly.*)

Captain. Captain, will you come—

(*But she stares at the baby, and her next call is directly at her ears.*)

Captain!

(*And now, still staring, KATE screams. KELLER in the yard hears it, and runs with the lamp back to the house. KATE screams again, her look intent on the baby and terrible. KELLER hurries in and up.*)

KELLER. Katie? What's wrong?

KATE. Look.

(*She makes a pass with her hand in the crib, at the baby's eyes.*)

KELLER. What, Katie? She's well, she needs only time to—

KATE. She can't see. Look at her eyes.

(*She takes the lamp from him, moves it before the child's face.*)

She can't see!

KELLER (*hoarsely*). Helen.

KATE. Or hear. When I screamed she didn't blink. Not an eyelash—

KELLER. Helen. Helen!

KATE. She can't hear you!

KELLER. Helen!

(*His face has something like fury in it, crying the child's name; KATE almost fainting presses her knuckles to her mouth, to stop her own cry.*)

(*The room dims out quickly.*)

Scene II

Time, in the form of a slow tune of distant chimes which approaches in a crescendo and then fades, passes; the light comes up again on a day five years later, on three kneeling children and an old dog outside around the pump.

The dog is a setter named BELLE, and she is sleeping. Two of the children are African-American, MARTHA and PERCY. The third child is HELEN six and a half years old, quite unkempt, in body a vivacious³ little person with a fine head, attractive, but noticeably blind, one eye larger and protruding; her gestures are abrupt, insistent, lacking in human restraint, and her face never smiles. She is flanked by the other two, in a litter of paper-doll cutouts, and while they speak HELEN'S hands thrust at their faces in turn, feeling baffledly at the movements of their lips.

MARTHA (*snipping*). First I'm gonna cut off this doctor's legs, one, two, now then—

PERCY. Why you cuttin' off that doctor's legs?

MARTHA. I'm gonna give him a operation. Now I'm gonna cut off his arms, one, two. Now I'm gonna fix up—

3. **vivacious** (vie VAY shuss): full of animation; lively.

Interpreting

5. Why does Helen try to stab Martha with a pair of scissors?
6. Why does James suggest that Helen be put away in an asylum?
7. Why is Captain Keller reluctant to contact Dr. Chisholm?
8. Why does Dr. Anagnos think Annie Sullivan is the right person for this job?
9. Why does Annie accept the challenge of teaching Helen?

Concluding

10. List the three reasons why Annie believes she can do this job.
11. What constitutes the first clash between Annie and Captain Keller?
12. What does Helen find when she unlocks Annie's trunk?

Examining Drama


- The playwright uses stage directions regarding light and sound to establish mood.
 - Make a sequential list of the stage directions in Act One that concern light.
 - Note their effect.

Thinking About Drama

- Act One is replete with conflict. There is **internal conflict** that characters experience within themselves, and **external conflict** that characters experience with each other (**man vs. man**) and with the results of Helen's infant illness (**man vs. nature**). Make a chart similar to the one below.

	Internal Conflict	External Conflict		
		Man vs. Man		Man v. Nature
Character's Name	Character's Conflict within Him- or Herself	Conflict with Character 1	Conflict with Character 2	Reaction to Helen's disability
Keller				

Creating and Writing

 Take a scene from your life, recent or from the past, at home or at school, and write the first act of a play. Do not concern yourself with theme. In writing, most often themes emerge, without plan. This is practice in writing dialogue for drama and

stage directions. Don't forget to establish setting, through scenery, placement of the actors, lighting, and sound effects.

Vocabulary

divert (dih VERT) *v.*: distract; turn aside from a path or course; deflect (p. 341)

endeavor (in DEV ur) *v.*: to attempt, to try, to make an effort (p. 344)

imperious (im PEER ee iss) *adj.*: domineering; haughty; like a dictator or tyrant (p. 345)

inarticulate (IN ar TIK yuh lit) *adj.*: speechless; unable to speak coherently or express oneself fully (p. 338)

indulge (in DULJ) *v.*: to yield to the wishes or whims of; pamper (p. 337)

morosely (muh ROSE lee) *adv.*: gloomily; with sullen ill-humor (p. 337)

oblivious (uh BLIV ee us) *v.*: unaware (p. 349)

obstinate (AHB stih nit) *adj.*: stubborn (p. 338)

serene (sih REEN) *adj.*: calm; peaceful; tranquil (p. 348)

swaddled (SWAHD ild) *v.*: bound with swaddling clothes to prevent free movement; wrapped round with bandages (p. 337)

William Gibson —(1914-)

William Gibson's first popular success came with his first novel, "The Cobweb." He is best known for his drama "The Miracle Worker" written in 1956. Today Gibson lives with his family in Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

Focus

The major conflict, or struggle, within “The Miracle Worker,” involves an **abstraction** (an idea) rather than the characters. It is the struggle for faith. Only hope keeps Annie Sullivan going through the violence of her physical struggles with Helen, and through the mentally searing discussions she is forced to have with the members of Helen's family. The absence of hope that characterizes James through much of the play is transformed near the end of Act Three. Captain Keller is skeptical—he may feel hope will weaken him—and is irritated by the challenge from Annie Sullivan, but he keeps moving slowly forward through the urging of his wife, Kate. Kate *needs* to believe, but cannot tolerate the long separation from Helen that may be required for Annie Sullivan to succeed.

The hope the characters require, to hang in there for the long haul, often wavers. Their inability to believe in the possibility of success creates a series of conflicts, like a series of tremors. Only Annie and the audience know how urgent the struggle is.

Notice

Notice how well Act Three is constructed, how much tension builds, layer upon layer, until its shattering ending. Consider, as you read, the energy that is compacted into this single act, from Annie's desperation that she make a breakthrough with Helen, that Helen understand *one* word, to her begging Captain Keller for one more week, one-half week, but certainly till the agreed upon six o'clock! We struggle with her as, again and again, she tries to convey the connection between an object, which has a *name*, and the letters she forms in Helen's hand.

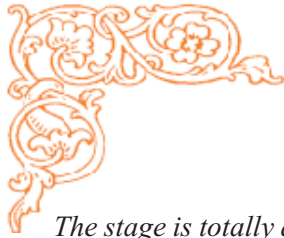
Vocabulary

debris (duh BREE) *adj.*: the remains of anything destroyed; ruins; rubble (p. 380)

disentangles (DISS en TANG ilz) *v.*: to free from entanglement; untangle (p. 373)

douses (DOW siz) *v.*: soaks (p. 380)

prevails (pree VAY ilz) *v.*: to be widespread or current; exist generally; to be victorious; to triumph (p. 380)



Act Three

Scene I

The stage is totally dark, until we see ANNIE and HELEN silhouetted on the bed in the garden house. ANNIE'S voice is audible, very patient, and worn; it has been saying this for a long time.

ANNIE. Water, Helen. This is water. W, a, t, e, r. It has a *name*.

(A silence. Then:)

Egg, e, g, g. It has a *name*, the name stands for the thing. Oh, it's so simple to explain.

(The lights have commenced to rise, not on the garden house but on the homestead. Then:)

Helen, Helen, the chick *has* to come out of its shell, sometime. You come out, too.

(In the bedroom, upstairs, we see VINEY unhurriedly washing the window, dusting, turning the mattress, readying the room for use again; then in the family room a diminished group at one end of the table—KATE, KELLER, JAMES—finishing up a quiet breakfast; then outside, down right, the other servant on his knees, assisted by MARTHA, working with a trowel around a new trellis and wheelbarrow. The scene is one of everyday calm, and all are oblivious to ANNIE'S voice.)

There's only one way out, for you, and it's language. To learn that your fingers can talk. And say anything, anything you can name. This is mug. Mug, m, u, g. Helen, it has a *name*. It—has—a—*name*—

(KATE rises from the table.)

KELLER *(gently)*. You haven't eaten, Katie.

KATE *(smiles, shakes her head)*. I haven't the appetite. I'm too—restless, I can't sit to it.

KELLER. You should eat, my dear. It will be a long day, waiting.

JAMES *(lightly)*. But it's been a short two weeks. I never thought life could be so—noiseless, went much too quickly for me.

(KATE and KELLER gaze at him, in silence. JAMES

becomes uncomfortable.)

ANNIE. C, a, r, d. Card. C, a-

JAMES. Well, the house has been practically normal, hasn't it?

KELLER *(harshly)*. Jimmie.

JAMES. Is it wrong to enjoy a quiet breakfast, after five years?

KELLER. It could be even more noiseless, Jimmie, without your tongue running every minute. Haven't you enough feeling to imagine what Katie has been undergoing, ever since—

(KATE stops him.)

KATE. Captain.

(To JAMES.)

It's true. The two weeks have been normal, quiet, all you say. But not short. Interminable.¹

(She rises, and wanders out; she pauses on the porch steps, gazing toward the garden house.)

ANNIE *(fading)*. W, a, t, e, r. But it means *this*. W, a, t, e, r. *This*. W, a, t-

JAMES. I only meant that Miss Sullivan is a boon.²

Of contention,³ though, it seems.

KELLER *(heavily)*. If and when you're a parent, Jimmie, you will understand what separation means. A mother loses a—protector.

JAMES *(baffled)*. Hm?

KELLER. You'll learn, we don't just keep our children safe. They keep us safe.

(He rises, with his empty coffee cup and saucer.)

There are of course all kinds of separation, Katie has lived with one kind for five years. And another is disappointment. In a child.

(He goes with the cup out the rear door. JAMES sits for a long moment of stillness. In the garden house the lights commence to come up; ANNIE, haggard⁴ at the table, is writing a letter, her face again almost in contact with the stationery; HELEN, apart on the stool, and for the first time as clean and neat as a button, is quietly crocheting an endless chain

1. **interminable** (IN TUR muh nih bul): without end.

2. **boon** (BOON): a welcome benefit; a great blessing.

3. **contention** (kun TEN shun): a dispute; argument. James makes a pun on the phrase "bone of contention" when he says "boon of contention."

4. **haggard** (HAG urd): having a wasted, worn look.

of wool, which snakes all around the room.)

ANNIE. "I, feel, every, day, more, and, more, in—" *(She pauses, and turns the pages of a dictionary open before her; her finger descends the words to a full stop. She elevates her eyebrows, then copies the word.)*

"—adequate."

(In the main house JAMES pushes up, and goes to the front doorway, after KATE.)

JAMES. Kate?

(KATE turns her glance. JAMES is rather weary.)

I'm sorry. Open my mouth, like that fairy tale, frogs jump out.

KATE. No. It has been better. For everyone.

(She starts away, up center.)

ANNIE *(writing)*. "If, only, there, were, someone, to, help, me, I, need, a, teacher, as, much, as, Helen—my, mind, is, undisciplined, full, of, skips, and, jumps, and—"

(She halts, rereads, frowns.)

Hm.

(ANNIE puts her nose again in the dictionary, flips back to an earlier page, and fingers down the words; KATE presently comes down toward the bay window with a trayful of food.)

Disinter—disinterested—disjoin—dis—

(She backtracks, indignant.)

Disinterested, disjoin—Where's discipline?

(She goes a page or two back, searching with her finger, muttering.)

What a dictionary, have to know how to spell it before you can look it up how to spell it, disciple, discipline! Diskipline.

(She corrects the word in her letter.)

Undisciplined.

(But her eyes are bothering her, she closes them in exhaustion and gently fingers the eyelids. KATE watches her through the window.)

KATE. What are doing to your eyes?

(ANNIE glances around; she puts her smoked glasses on, and gets up to come over, assuming a cheerful energy.)

ANNIE. It's worse on my vanity! I'm learning to spell. It's like a surprise party, the most unex-

pected characters turn up.

KATE. You're not to overwork your eyes, Miss Annie.

ANNIE. Well.

(She takes the tray, sets it on her chair, and carries chair and tray to HELEN.)

Whatever I spell to Helen I'd better spell right.

KATE *(almost wistful)*. How—serene she is.

ANNIE. She learned this stitch yesterday. Now I can't get her to stop!

(She disentangles one foot from the wool chain, and sets the chair before HELEN. HELEN at its contact with her knee feels the plate, promptly sets her crocheting down, and tucks the napkin in at her neck, but ANNIE withholds the spoon; when HELEN finds it missing, she folds her hands in her lap, and quietly waits. ANNIE twinkles at KATE with mock devoutness.)

Such a little lady, she'd sooner starve than eat with her fingers.

(She gives HELEN the spoon, and HELEN begins to eat, neatly.)

KATE. You've taught her so much, these two weeks. I would never have—

ANNIE. Not enough.

(She is suddenly gloomy, shakes her head.)

Obedience isn't enough. Well, she learned two nouns this morning, key and water, brings her up to eighteen nouns and three verbs.

KATE *(hesitant)*. But—not—

ANNIE. No. Not that they mean things. It's still a finger-game, no meaning.

(She turns to KATE, abruptly.)

Mrs. Keller—

(But she defers it; she comes back, to sit in the bay and lift her hand.)

Shall we play our finger-game?

KATE. How will she learn it?

ANNIE. It will come.

(She spells a word; KATE does not respond.)

KATE. How?

ANNIE *(a pause)*. How does a bird learn to fly?

(She spells again.)

We're born to use words, like wings, it has to