

Study Guide prepared by
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The Miracle Worker

By William Gibson

*Especially for Grades 6-12

Barter Theatre – Spring 2015

(NOTE: standards are included for reading the play and seeing a performance, as well as for completing the study guide.)

Virginia SOLs

English: 6.1, 6.2, 6.4, 6.5, 6.7, 7.1, 7.2, 7.4, 7.5, 7.7, 7.9, 8.2, 8.4, 8.5, 8.7, 8.9, 9.1, 9.3, 9.4, 9.6, 10.1, 10.3, 10.4, 10.6, 12.1, 12.3, 12.4, 12.6

Theatre Arts: 6.5, 6.7, 6.18, 6.23, 7.6, 7.20, 8.5, 8.18, 8.22, 8.25, TI.8, TI.11, TI.13, TI.16, TI.17, TII.9, TII.12, TII.15, T3III.6, TIII.11, TIII.17, TIV.12, TIV.13

History: USII.1, USII.2, USII.3, USII.4

Tennessee /North Carolina Common Core State Standards

English/Language Arts - Reading Literacy: 6.1, 6.3, 6.4, 6.7, 7.1, 7.3, 7.4, 7.7, 8.1, 8.4, 8.7, 8.10, 9-10.1, 9-10.3, 9-10.4, 9-10.5, 9-10.10, 11-12.1, 11-12.3, 11-12.4, 11-12.5, 11-12.7, 11-12.10

English Language Arts – Writing: 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.7, 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 7.7, 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, 8.7, 9-10.1, 9-10.2, 9-10.3, 9-10.7, 9-10.10, 11-12.1, 11-12.2, 11-12.3, 11-12.7, 11-12.9, 11-12.10

Tennessee Standards

History: 8.47, 8.52, GC.48, US.6

Theatre 6-8: 1.4, 3.2, 3.4, 6.1, 6.2, 7.1, 7.2 **Theatre 9-12:**3.2, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 6.2, 7.1, 7.2

North Carolina Essential Standards

Theatre Arts – 6.A.1, 6.AE.1, 6.CU.2, 7.A.1, 7.AE.1, 7.CU.2, 8.A.1, 8.AE.1, 8.CU.2, B.C.2, B.A.1, B.AE.1, B.CU.1, B.CU.2, I.C.2, I.A.1, I.CU.1, I.CU.2, P.C.1, P.A.1, P.CU.2, A.C.2, A.A.1, A.CU.1, A.CU.2

Setting

Various locations in and around Ivy Green, the Keller home in Tuscumbia, Alabama. Time, 1880s.



Characters

Helen Keller – a deaf and blind girl

Kate – Helen's mother

Captain Keller – Helen's father

James – Helen's older brother

Aunt Ev – Captain Keller's sister

Annie Sullivan – Helen's teacher

Viney – the Keller's servant

Percy – the Keller's servant



Vocabulary Words

constitution

acute

congestion

oculist

impudence

asylum

defective

affliction

iota

precocious

governess

desiccated

famished

temperance

nincompoop

obstinate

deprive

tantrum

tyrant

presume

hireling

disinter

frivolous

scuttle

epileptic

siege

interminable

inadequate

serene

obedience

exile

aversion

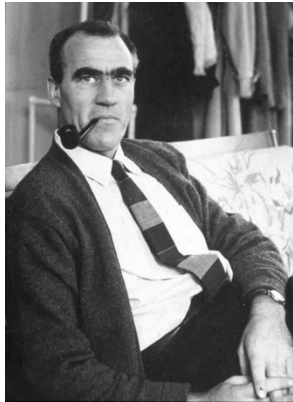
consummately



Synopsis

As a nineteen-month-old baby, Helen Keller was afflicted with a fever that left her blind and deaf. Years later, as a young girl, with no ability to communicate, she has become wild and undisciplined. In desperation, her father, Captain Keller, writes to the Perkins Institute of the Blind in Boston and asks them to send a teacher who might be able to reach Helen. Enter Annie Sullivan, a twenty year old former Perkin's student. With her bad eyesight, Irish humor, and brash Yankee manners, Annie is not at all what this southern, well-bred family was expecting. She and Captain Keller butt heads time and again, but in spite of that, Helen's mother Kate is determined to make it work – Annie is Helen's last hope. Soon Helen and Annie are locked in a battle of wills; Helen, used to having things her own way, resents Annie's attempt at discipline. After an epic battle at the breakfast table, Annie persuades the Kellers to let her remove Helen to a guest house, where she – Annie – would be in charge of Helen's every need. Captain Keller gives Annie two weeks there. Once Helen finds herself dependent on Annie, she calms down and Annie takes advantage of the truce to teach Helen the manual alphabet and how to associate words with objects, but although Helen learns to make the letters, she has no idea what they mean. Finally the two weeks are up and Helen is returned home where all the discipline Annie instilled in her is undone. Another battle over manners ensues, and Helen throws a pitcher of water at Annie. Annie drags Helen out to the pump to make her refill the pitcher. As the water pours from the spout, Annie puts one of Helen's hands in it while finger-spelling "w-a-t-e-r" into the other. In that moment it all becomes clear to Helen what Annie is trying to teach her – the miracle of language and communication has finally broken through the darkness.

Biography of William Gibson, Playwright



William Gibson was born New York City on November 13, 1914. His father was a mailroom clerk, a fate Gibson was determined to avoid. He studied creative writing at City College of New York from 1930 to 1932, but dropped out to roam about the country, trying various careers, including a stint as an actor at the newly formed Barter Theatre in Abingdon, VA. He eventually found himself in Kansas, where he supported himself as a piano teacher while pursuing playwriting. Here he met Margaret Brenman, whom he married in 1940. His earliest plays, produced in Topeka, were light comedies. In the early 1950s, the couple moved to Stockbridge, MA, where Margaret took a job as a psychoanalyst. Gibson wrote a novel, *The*

Cobweb, about a mental health hospital. His first widespread theater success was *Two for the Seesaw* (1958), his first major play produced in New York City. But it was his next play, *The Miracle Worker*, which proved to be his greatest success. Originally written and performed as a television drama, the play was later adapted for stage and film. Gibson largely withdrew from the New York theater scene during the 1960s and 1970s. His last major play for the New York stage, *Golden Boy* (1964). He also had an unexpected late-career hit with an Off-Broadway production of his solo Golda Meir play *Golda's Balcony* (2003). William Gibson died November 25, 2008.

Biographies of Annie Sullivan & Helen Keller

Anne Sullivan was born on April 14, 1866 in Feeding Hills, Massachusetts. She was the oldest child of Thomas and Alice Sullivan, immigrants who had left Ireland during the Great Famine. Annie had a very difficult childhood. When she was five years old, she contracted trachoma, an eye disease that left her nearly blind. Three years later, when she was eight, her mother died



and her father abandoned the family. Annie and her younger brother Jimmie were sent to live in the “poor house” in Tewksbury. Conditions at the Tewksbury Almshouse were deplorable. The mortality rate was very high, and within three months of their arrival, Jimmie Sullivan died. Annie mourned his loss the rest of her life.

Fortunately, a few people took an interest in Sullivan and gave her opportunities to improve her lot. She underwent eye operations that gave her limited, short-term relief. Annie also learned that there were schools for blind children. Determined to get an education, Annie asked an inspector visiting Tewksbury if she might be admitted to one of those schools. That moment changed her life. On October 7, 1880, Annie Sullivan entered the Perkins Institution for the Blind. Although she was behind the other students academically and socially, Annie worked hard to catch up. She had yet another surgery on her eyes, and this time it improved her vision dramatically. At last she could see well enough to read print.

On June 27, 1880 – the summer before Annie entered Perkins – Helen Keller was born to Captain Arthur Keller and his second wife, Kate, in Tuscumbia, Alabama. At the age of nineteen months, Helen suffered a fever that left her both blind and deaf. As she grew older, cut off from her family in her dark, silent world, Helen became more and more frustrated at her inability to communicate – as a result, she threw tantrums, which her overwrought parents indulged in order to keep the peace.

Meanwhile, back in Boston, Annie befriended a much older Perkins resident, Laura Bridgman, who was both deaf and blind. Bridgman taught the manual alphabet or “finger-signing” to Annie. Annie continued working hard and, in 1886, graduated at the top of her class. That same summer, Captain Keller wrote to the director of the Perkins school asking him to recommend a teacher for Helen. Annie was chosen for the job. In March of 1887 she left for Tuscumbia, where she met young Helen. After just two weeks, Annie taught Helen the meaning of language using the manual alphabet, and from that moment on, a lifelong friendship was born. For the next 49 years, Annie was Helen’s constant companion and teacher.

By 1900, Helen had learned so much she entered Radcliffe College. Sullivan attended classes with her, spelling the instructors' lectures into Keller's hand and reading textbooks to her for hours. While they were there Annie met an instructor named John Macy. They fell in love, and after Helen's graduation in 1904, they married.



Helen, John Macy and Annie at home



Helen at Radcliffe

Helen lived with them in Massachusetts, where she became interested in various social causes and, in fact, became a member of the Socialist Party, much to the chagrin of her many admirers. Soon Annie and Helen were traveling around the country giving lectures and telling Helen's story. Annie's devotion to Helen became a strain on her marriage. By 1914, John and Annie separated permanently, although they never divorced. In 1915, a Scottish woman named Polly Thomson joined the household, serving as Helen's secretary. A few years later, in order to make money, Annie and Helen took to the vaudeville circuit. In their act, Annie showed the audience how she taught Helen to read and talk. They toured for three years. Annie's eyesight continued to fail and by 1933 she was completely blind. On October 20, 1936, at the age of 70, Annie died at their home in Forest Hills, New York. Her cremated remains were interred in Washington's National Cathedral.



Helen, Annie & Polly

Polly stayed on with Helen as her companion for several more years. In 1957, Polly suffered a stroke. A nurse, Winnie Corbally, came to take care of Polly and Helen, and when Polly died on March 20, 1960, Winnie became Helen's caretaker/companion. Helen Keller, symbol of indomitable human spirit, died on June 1, 1968. She is interred at the National Cathedral between Annie Sullivan and Polly Thomson.



A Brief History

Barter Theatre was founded during the Great Depression by Robert Porterfield, an enterprising young actor. He and his fellow actors found themselves out of work and hungry in New York City. Porterfield contrasted that to the abundance of food, but lack of live theatre, around his home region in Southwest Virginia. He returned to Washington County with an extraordinary proposition: bartering produce from the farms and gardens of the area to gain admission to see a play.

Barter Theatre opened its doors on June 10, 1933 proclaiming, “With vegetables you cannot sell, you can buy a good laugh.” The price of admission was 40 cents or the equivalent in produce, the concept of trading “ham for Hamlet” caught on quickly. At the end of the first season, the Barter Company cleared \$4.35 in cash, two barrels of jelly and enjoyed a collective weight gain of over 300 pounds.

Playwrights including Noel Coward, Tennessee Williams and Thornton Wilder accepted Virginia ham as payment for royalties. An exception was George Bernard Shaw, a vegetarian, who bartered the rights to his plays for spinach.

Today, Barter Theatre has a reputation as a theatre where many actors performed before going on to achieve fame and fortune. The most recognized of these alumni include Gregory Peck, Patricia Neal, Ernest Borgnine, Hume Cronyn, Ned Beatty, Gary Collins, Larry Linville and Frances Fisher. The list also included James Burrows, creator of *Cheers*, Barry Corbin, and the late Jim Varney

Robert Porterfield passed away in 1971. His successor, Rex Partington, had been at Barter in the 1950s as an actor and in the 1970s as stage manager. Rex returned as chief administrator from 1972 until his retirement in 1992. In March 2006, he passed away.

Richard Rose was named the producing artistic director in October 1992. In that time, attendance has grown from 42,000 annual patrons to more than 163,000 annual patrons. Significant capital improvements have also been made. Including maintenance to both theatres, and in 2006, the addition of The Barter Café at Stage II and dramatic improvements to Porterfield Square.

Barter represents three distinct venues of live theatre: Barter Theatre Main Stage, Barter Theatre Stage II and The Barter Players. Barter Theatre, with over 500 seats, features traditional theatre in a luxurious setting. Barter Stage II, across the street from Barter Main Stage and beyond Porterfield Square, offers seating for 167 around a thrust stage in an intimate setting and is perfect for more adventurous productions. The Barter Players is a talented ensemble of actors, producing plays for young audiences throughout the year.

History is always in the making at Barter Theatre, building on legends of the past; Barter looks forward to the challenge of growth in the future.

Questions/Activities for Middle/High School

LANGUAGE

Imagine that you cannot speak. Breaking into groups, create a sign language that would allow your group to communicate with each other. You should also keep a list of words that you consider essential as well as an explanation as to why they are necessary.

Now have a different group write a sentence on a piece of paper. Using your newly created sign language, try to communicate this sentence to your group. How successful were you? Did you ever get frustrated? Do you take for granted your ability to speak? **Discuss.**



Write it!

In this play, Annie writes letters frequently. Later on in life, Helen kept a journal. Spend an hour blindfolded and **then write about your experience.** What was difficult for you? What did you notice that you usually don't? Spend another hour wearing ear plugs. Again, write down your experience. How do the two compare? If you had to choose between being blind or being deaf, which would you pick? **Discuss.** Now imagine you are either Kate or James Keller; **write a journal entry** dated the night after Helen learns to speak.



Map It!

In *The Miracle Worker*, the Annie Sullivan lives in Boston, Massachusetts. The Keller family lives in Tuscumbia, Alabama. Locate both cities/towns on a map. How far is it from Boston to Tuscumbia? In the play, Annie says that she had been on the train several days. Map out a route for a car to drive from Boston to Tuscumbia. If your average speed was 70mph, how long would it take you to get there?



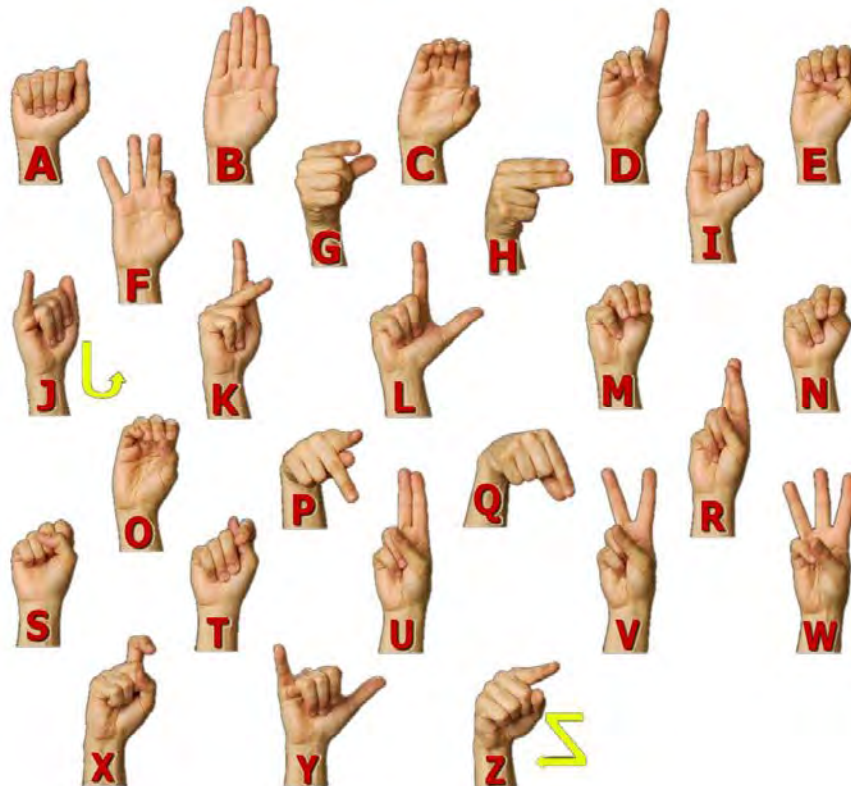
Because Helen Keller was blind as well as deaf, she couldn't use American Sign Language (ASL) as we know it today. Instead, she became an expert in "finger-spelling;" she would feel the shapes of the letters as they were spelled into her hand and communicate back in the same fashion.

Question: What is fingerspelling?

Answer: Fingerspelling is the process of spelling out words by using signs that correspond to the letters of the word. An ASL user would use the American Finger-spelled Alphabet, (also called the American Manual Alphabet). There are many different manual alphabets throughout the world.

The American Finger-spelled Alphabet consists of 22 handshapes that – when held in certain positions and/or are produced with certain movements – represent the 26 letters of the American alphabet. Memorize the alphabet below and try to communicate to a fellow student using it. What is it like to communicate this way?

Discuss.



Be Descriptive!

Helen Keller couldn't see or hear, yet she was able to describe what it was like to take a walk through the woods and "feel" its beauty through her sense of touch. Read her description below:

"How was it possible, I asked myself, to walk for an hour through the woods and see nothing worthy of note? I who cannot see find hundreds of things to interest me through mere touch. I feel the delicate symmetry of a leaf. I pass my hands lovingly about the smooth skin of a silver birch, or the rough, shaggy bark of a pine. In spring I touch the branches of trees hopefully in search of a bud, the first sign of awakening Nature after her winter's sleep. I feel the delightful, velvety texture of a flower, and discover its remarkable convolutions; and something of the miracle of Nature is revealed to me. Occasionally, if I am very fortunate, I place my hand gently on a small tree and feel the happy quiver of a bird in full song. I am delighted to have the cool waters of a brook rush through my open fingers. To me a lush carpet of pine needles or spongy grass is more welcome than the most luxurious Persian rug. To me the pageant of seasons is a thrilling and unending drama, the action of which streams through my fingertips..."



ACTIVITY

Students:

Find a picture of a person, place or thing from a magazine and write a description of him/her/it in your own words. Be as descriptive as possible.

Teacher:

Number the pictures and place them on one wall of the classroom. Give the students copies of the descriptions and see if they are able to match them to the appropriate picture!

Be Artistic!

In 1933, Helen Keller wrote *Three Days to See*, in which she lists the things she'd like to see if she had her vision restored for three days. Read her following descriptions:

“In the afternoon of that first seeing day, I should take a long walk in the woods and intoxicate my eyes on the beauties of the world of Nature, trying desperately to absorb in a few hours the vast splendor which is constantly unfolding itself to those who can see. On the way home from my woodland jaunt my path would lie near a farm so that I might see the patient horses ploughing in the field (perhaps I should see only a tractor!) and the serene content of men living close to the soil. And I should pray for the glory of a colorful sunset...”

“I look ahead, and before me rise the fantastic towers of New York, a city that seems to have stepped from the pages of a fairy story. What an awe-inspiring sight, these glittering spires, these vast banks of stone and steel – structures such as the gods might build for themselves! This animated picture is a part of the lives of millions of people every day... I stroll down Fifth Avenue. I throw my eyes out of focus, so that I see no particular object but only a seething kaleidoscope of color. I am certain that the colors of women's dresses moving in a throng must be a gorgeous spectacle of which I should never tire. I am convinced that I should become an inveterate window shopper, for it must be a delight to the eye to view the myriad articles of beauty on display...”

“Often I have visited the New York Museum of Natural History to touch with my hands many of the objects there exhibited, but I have longed to see with my eyes the condensed history of the earth and its inhabitants displayed there – animals and the races of men pictured in their native environment; gigantic carcasses of dinosaurs and mastodons which roamed the earth long before man appeared, with his tiny stature and powerful brain, to conquer the animal kingdom; realistic presentations of the processes of evolution in animals, in man, and in the implements which man has used to fashion for himself a secure home on this planet; and a thousand and one other aspects of natural history...”

Now working in whichever medium you choose – paint, pencil, pen and ink, charcoal, etc. – illustrate one of the descriptions above. What would you want to see if you only had 3 days of sight? Discuss.



Word Search

Find the following words in the puzzle below: **Helen, teacher, Annie Sullivan, Perkins School, deaf, blind, water, Tuscumbia, Boston, Irish, miracle, sign language, Jimmie, communication, pump, garden house, Alabama, Percy, Kate, Captain Keller, train, Barter Theatre, William Gibson, alphabet**

S C P M U P R P E S J G N D T
I P O P N E Z L E I A A R N C
G T A M T A C J M R V K E I A
N B E A M A F M D I C M H L P
L O W B R U I E L E O Y C B T
A S M I A E N L A L A B A M A
N T M S D H U I R I S H E T I
G O L E O S P E C B Z G T R N
U N A U E D Q L T A V N J A K
A F S I A R E V A A T M U I E
G E N N D O T J P R K I E N L
E N P E R K I N S S C H O O L
A W I L L I A M G I B S O N E
E R T A E H T R E T R A B W R
A I B M U C S U T N E L E H A

True and False

Write **T** if the statement is **True** and **F** if the statement is **False**.

1. ____ The Perkins Institute for the Blind is located in Boston.
2. ____ Helen Keller was born blind and deaf.
3. ____ Both Annie and Helen had brothers named James or “Jimmie.”
4. ____ Helen Keller eventually learned to speak.
5. ____ Annie Sullivan came from a wealthy, influential family.
6. ____ Captain Keller’s home is named Green Ivy.
7. ____ Kate is Captain Keller’s second wife.
8. ____ It took Annie two years to make Helen associate words with objects.
9. ____ Polly Thomson was Helen’s companion after Annie Sullivan died.
10. ____ Helen was a well-behaved girl before Annie’s arrival.
11. ____ As an adult, Helen lectured on social causes and joined the Socialist Party.
12. ____ The first word Helen associated with an object was “pump.”
13. ____ Like Helen, Annie Sullivan was deaf.

“The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen nor even touched, but just felt in the heart.” -Helen Keller, 1891.

Matching

Draw a line connecting the noun in the 1st column with its corresponding description in the 2nd.

- | | |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Tuscumbia | a. a wild and undisciplined girl |
| 2. Annie Sullivan | b. the poorhouse where Annie lived |
| 3. Viney | c. Helen’s hometown |
| 4. Laura Bridgman | d. Captain Keller’s second wife |
| 5. Tewksbury | e. Annie’s school |
| 6. Perkins | f. playwright |
| 7. Helen Keller | g. Teacher |
| 8. Kate | h. the Keller home |
| 9. William Gibson | i. a servant |
| 10. Ivy Green | j. taught Annie the manual alphabet |

1. Characters in a play or a book always have a reason for doing what they do. This is referred to as their “motivation.” What motivates Mr. Keller to write to Perkins? What motivates Annie to accept a teaching position?

Make a list of the characters in *The Miracle Worker*. Next to each name write that character’s primary action in the play and their motivation. **Cite passages from the play to support your reasoning.** Did interactions with the other characters change or alter their motivations? If so, how did this affect the plot?

2. Define “protagonist.” Who is the protagonist of *The Miracle Worker*? Why? **Discuss.**

Compare and Contrast!

Both Laura Bridgman and Helen Keller went deaf and blind at a very young age. Both were able to overcome these challenges and learned to communicate with the outside world – and yet, while Helen Keller became world famous, Laura Bridgman remains relatively unknown.



Laura Bridgman



Helen Keller

Using the internet, research the lives of Laura Bridgman and Helen Keller, then write a paper comparing and contrasting them. How did Annie Sullivan play a role in both?

3. **Write a paper that either defends or refutes the following sentence:** “Without Laura Bridgman, there would be no Helen Keller”?

4. All of the characters undergo major changes over the course of the play. While Helen’s is the most dramatic, the changes in the Captain, James and Annie are also significant. **Discuss** each character’s individual transformation and how these changes are interconnected.

5. What was the general attitude toward people who were blind or deaf during the 1880s when *The Miracle Worker* takes place? Do you think people who were blind or deaf had prospects for careers, relationships, or financial independence? How have society's views toward people with disabilities changed? Opportunities? **The laws? Discuss.**

HISTORY LIVES!

This play is set in the 1887, twenty years after the Civil War ended, Make a timeline of major events that occurred in the United States from 1865 to 1887. Given that the Kellers lived in Alabama, and that Annie was from Massachusetts, how do you think these events shaped the actions of the characters in this story? How does knowledge of the history surrounding this time period make the play more accessible? **Discuss how the various subjects studied in school often overlap.**

6. How do Annie's memories of her brother Jimmie influence her behavior as an adult? Do they help or hinder her work with Helen? Which other experiences from Annie's past shape how she works with Helen? **Discuss.**

Now think about your own experiences. What aspects of your background and experience influence the way you work with other people? Do you think this will change as you get older? Discuss.

7. **Write a critique of Barter's production of *The Miracle Worker*.** Be sure to include descriptions and analyses of the individual performances, the directing/staging choices, and the design elements (costume, set, props, sound). Why do you think some of these artistic choices were made? How would you have done it differently?

8. What was your personal response to Barter's production of *The Miracle Worker*? Were you entertained? What did this play teach you about the human experience? **Discuss.**

9. Pick your favorite scene from *The Miracle Worker* and **design a set** for it. Keep in mind time, place and location. Also consider the entrances and exits of your characters. Keep in mind, especially, that the actor playing Helen must be "blind." What must you incorporate in your set to make sure she stays safe? Draw a picture of what your set should look like. Then make a model of it and present it to your class, explaining how it will work when built.

10. Both Helen Keller and Annie Sullivan lived long, fascinating lives. Why do you think William Gibson, the playwright, chose to center his play around this particular time – when Annie taught Helen the meaning of language? How did this choice contribute to the play’s overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact? **Discuss.**

Suggested Reading

Books by Helen Keller:

The Story of My Life

The World I Live In

My Religion

My Story

Teacher: Anne Sullivan Macy

Books about Annie Sullivan

Anne Sullivan Macy: The Story Behind Helen Keller by Nella Braddy

Beyond the Miracle Worker by Kim E. Nielsen

Other Links:

In 1824, Louis Braille created a method using raised dots that people who are blind can use in order to read. It is not a language, but a code by which another language can be written and read. Research the braille system and its uses today. See if you can locate signs or labels in your school or community that are printed in braille. Can you find an example to share with your classmates?

Check out www.afb.org/braillebug for a guide to the language and fun games to give you deeper insight into the world of braille.

Helen Keller speaks out!

Watch Helen, with the help of Polly Thompson, address her speaking issues: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ch_H8pt9M8