



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2018 Volume III: Adaptation: Literature, Film and Society

The Miracle Worker: Bridging Drama and Film Study to Build Critical Literacy Skills

Curriculum Unit 18.03.01, published September 2018
by Brandon Barr

Introduction

When I first started teaching, I taught a student that had suffered an injury at birth that impaired his physical development. This child relied on a wheelchair to get around the school campus and had to wear special protective devices to support his upper body. This student, who was extremely friendly and worked as hard as he could, received inclusion services to support his academic achievement. When I think back on him, I remember what a thoughtful student he was in eighth grade. He would ask questions about my day to show that he cared and was a good friend to his peers who had grown to look out for him. He was also fiercely independent. He did not want any special treatment. For instance, I remember taking the kids outside at the end of the year to play dodgeball. He made sure to call me out to throw that dodgeball at him, and I gladly obliged. The joy whipping foam dodgeballs at all of my students that day still brings a smile to my face.

Humor aside, the transition into adolescence isn't easy. In fact, many of the challenges that my students face can even seem daunting and life-altering. Sometimes these changes are. With that in mind, I think it is helpful to think about individuals like my former student who have faced major life challenges and were able to move forward in the best way possible. Helen Keller strikes me as an individual worth exploring with my students. Being deaf and blind, she relied on the support of her teacher and companions to make it through her life successfully. She was born with natural talent that was unlocked with the help of a supporting crew of individuals that had her best interest at heart. In selecting Helen Keller as the subject of extended reading, I hope that my students appreciate the accomplishments of an individual that are more complicated than the commonly-accepted historical narrative of her life.

With that in mind, I would like to explicitly state that the purpose of this unit is *not* to use her story as a means "to goad students into upright behaviors, or to silence students' concerns or grievances about their own lives."¹ A teacher taking a didactic approach to discussing Keller's life risks reducing Keller's experiences to being viewed solely from a perspective that is hyper-focused on her disabilities. However well-intentioned, that approach to teaching using Keller's story diminishes her varied contributions and unique circumstances that she faced during her lifetime. As you will come to see, it is critical to consider Keller's entire biography instead of focusing exclusively on *The Story of Life* and its derivative texts. By making students aware of some of Keller's life actions outside of the texts, students will be able to see the

multidimensional nature of Keller and why the melodramatic nature of the *The Miracle Worker* only captures a small sliver of her life.

Demographics

Mark Twain Elementary School is a Chicago Public School on the Southwest side of Chicago. The student population consists of 1,109 students, of which 83% are considered low income. The population is also roughly 84% Hispanic and 13% White with a large population of Polish- speaking students. Students that receive special education services account for roughly ten percent of the student population; and students that receive bilingual services account for another 16% of the student population. This unit is designed for roughly 120 sixth grade general education students. These are students that would have very little exposure to drama as a literary genre and possess little academic language that goes along with film study.²

Enduring Understandings

- There are many key terms associated with the study of film: different types of shots, angles, transitions, and cuts. These elements represent choices the filmmaker makes in order to tell a story.
- Drama is a play that can be performed for theatre or television. Dramas are written out as a script and are performed by actors.
- When we read about others who face difficulty or hardships like Helen Keller, we can learn about the circumstances that influence their choices. We don't read to judge someone but to understand their circumstances and individual decisions.

Essential Questions

- What is the language of film? How is it similar or different from language we use to describe narrative writing?
- What is drama? How should we approach reading, watching and performing a drama?
- What can we learn from Helen Keller's life experiences?

Implementing District Standards/Suggested Instructional Sequence

Two Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are at the heart of instructional planning for this unit: CCSS.RL.6.3 and CCSS.RL.6.7. The focus of CCSS.RL.6.3 is to "describe how a particular story's or drama's plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how characters respond or change as the plot moves forward toward a resolution."³ To master this standard, students must be able to identify how a story gets from the beginning to the end. This involves teaching students about the arc of a story, how characters respond to conflicts when they are introduced and how these conflicts shape individual characters as the narrative progresses. Mastery of the standard is reflected when students are not only able to explain the impact of events on specific characters, but students should also be able to infer a larger theme that relies on details from the text. The anchor text of the unit, *The Miracle Worker*, lends itself well to this type of work.

The other CCSS that is key to planning in this unit is CCSS.RL.6.7. The focus of CCSS.RL.6.7 is to "compare and contrast the experience of reading a story, drama, or poem to listening to or viewing an audio, video, or live version of the text, including contrasting what they "see" and "hear" when reading the text to what they perceive when they listen or watch."⁴ To demonstrate mastery of this standard, students must be able to leverage both the academic language that they have for fiction with the various film medium techniques that are used in film to compare the two texts. This involves instruction in the language of film and drama to build the capacity for students to understand how one medium amplifies and brings life to the other. Direct

instruction of film and drama technique needs to go together with robust student discussion of film and drama to get students to understand that similarities and authorial choices exist across narrative mediums.

This unit will complement the work that is expected of students in other units throughout the school year. I envision starting the unit with excerpts of *The Story of My Life* and sharing some of the content that I learned about Helen Keller that highlight her role as a vocal activist. From there, I plan on introducing students to drama as a genre and close reading and performing parts of *The Miracle Worker* in class with students. Once we have exhausted the written text, I will provide a brief introduction to doing a close reading of film and have students consider the choices that were made by the director in adapting the text to film. We will watch the film, pausing to discuss it at key scenes, and students will write a short paper tracing the choices that director made after a robust class conversation.

Content Objectives

Helen Keller

One key area that is important for teachers to know about before teaching the unit is Helen Keller's biography beyond *The Miracle Worker*. Helen Keller is an iconic person who was a pioneering figure in many ways. Her basic life narrative is well-known, so much so that a contemporary genre of joke-telling called Helen Keller jokes are commonly shared on the internet and even between teens.⁵ Black notes that many adolescents only know her today because of this genre of jokes. Some students may know some of her advocacy on behalf of blind individuals and individuals with disabilities. To only understand this about her legacy would not be a fair representation of all the contributions that she has made to society. To place Keller on a pedestal may not be entirely appropriate as well, as some of her actions do not align well with modern attitudes towards progressive causes and disability advocacy. Before approaching instruction of *The Miracle Worker*, it is helpful to understand the tensions that shaped Keller's public life that are not at all reflected in the *The Miracle Worker* texts.

In many ways, *The Story of My Life* and the derivative versions of *The Miracle Worker* serve to whitewash and sanitize some of the more radical activism that she engaged in during her lifetime. This is especially true because Keller wrote *The Story of My Life* before she engaged in the activist work that dominated much of her adult life. Right after *The Story of My Life* was published, Keller began to advocate for ways to end some forms of blindness in infants. Even though this may seem to a contemporary audience a logical and uncontroversial issue to advocate for, it was an extremely controversial topic to address given that one of the main sources of blindness in infants was the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases.⁶ After a few years, she grew more comfortable and plain-spoken in her approach discussing the "'bitter harvest of wild oats' sown by the husband, thus suggesting that prevention would have to encompass social issues...[with] emphasis on immorality-the sins of the father."⁷ By the late teens, she pushed this thinking even farther and more to the left claiming that it was a product of "'cruelty of our commercial society'" alluding to prostitution as one of the sources of the problem.⁸ This evolution over the course of a decade reveals extremely progressive views that were out-of-step with the mainstream at that point and would be considered progressive by many standards even today.

After the 1910's, Keller took up employment at the American Foundation for the Blind. During her time there,

she would go around the country raising funds and working locally to enhance conditions and change laws regarding blindness. She was extremely effective at fundraising, even though she disliked that aspect of the job.⁹ On the American Foundation for the Blind website, the foundation makes it clear to the casual visitor that the organization is still very much indebted to the visionary leadership of Keller; they are especially proud of the state commissions for the blind that were created, the rehabilitation centers that were built and how she supported efforts to make education accessible to individuals who were impacted by vision loss.¹⁰ The fact that the organization highlights her efforts today as well as houses an archive of primary sources related to Keller attests to her legacy associated with the organization.

Blindness was not the only issue in which Keller was a fierce advocate. One example of Keller's radical politics was her work with the ACLU; Keller was instrumental in founding the ACLU in 1920. Keller was part of the founding board of the ACLU along with Socialist politician Norman Thomas, Jane Addams, and A.J. Muste; they believed that the responsibility of their newly formed group was to uphold the "Bill of Rights in the courts and legislatures against incursions by government, private institutions, and individuals."¹¹ The ACLU played a tremendous role during Keller's lifetime supporting the needs of strikers and unions, high profile social cases such as the Scopes trial regarding evolution and the Sacco and Vanzetti case, and later efforts after World War II to respond to the efforts of McCarthy and the HUAC to expose and harass individuals thought to be Communists.¹² Her efforts to be a leader in this organization as an avowed Socialist speak to her ambition to influence politics in a progressive manner.

She took other radical positions as well. Keller was born in the South to a family that had several members who fought on behalf of the Confederacy. Her father, the Colonel, was extremely active during the Civil War years. This is depicted at several points in *The Miracle Worker*. Her family also had house servants that adhered to the racial norms of the segregated South.¹³ Despite growing up in an environment that was hostile to the changes that occurred with Reconstruction, Keller was racially progressive in unexpected ways. She wrote to W.E.B. DuBois explaining how institutional racism was wrong and donated money to the NAACP. DuBois published the letter, which shocked many individuals in the South: people felt that she was being manipulated and did not believe that she felt so strongly about racism because of her southern upbringing.¹⁴ This demonstrates that Keller was not afraid to take controversial positions and felt compelled to take actions that she felt were morally and ethically appropriate.

Keller was a Socialist at a time in American history in which that could have meant being ostracized from mainstream political discourse. She used her platform and early experiences to lecture on often contentious and progressive political issues like the women's right to vote, contraceptives, and pacifism, and the fight to end hunger.¹⁵ In considering her actions as an adult, it is important to note how she is one of the first individuals to be an advocate for the disabled in the modern world and used this platform to advance radical and Socialist causes. One of her autobiographies caused a great stir in Nazi Germany for her sharing of ideas that were in line with Lenin, so much so that her writing was considered subversive by the Nazis and was burned. Her political convictions also got her into trouble in the United States; the FBI opened a file on her for her deeply held Socialist views.¹⁶ Helen was a problematic figure for the establishment in the United States; she was a popular figure that attained the American dream through her hard work and determination to overcome adversity and help others similarly afflicted. Quicke observes, "But in her case this road [Keller's political advocacy] led straight past Victorian charity through liberal ideology towards a radical and ultimately Socialist consciousness."¹⁷ She wasn't some individual on the fringe of society advocating for dramatic change. This made her a problematic figure for the establishment for many reasons.

According to modern sensibilities, Helen Keller is also a controversial figure due to some of the less progressive beliefs that she espoused and public stances that she took. One area of concern was her support of the eugenics movement. She felt that it was desirable in some instances to either prevent birth or no longer sustain the life of a child with significant impairments. In taking a public stance on eugenics at a time when eugenics was actively being pursued by fascist world powers in Europe is an unfortunate coincidence that must be acknowledged. Although an advocate of the deaf and blind, she was not supportive of one pressing issue of the Deaf community: the use of American Sign Language (ASL). She supported the practice of learning how to read lips, even though the larger Deaf community needed her advocacy to support the adoption of ASL. Keller was a “superstar” of the disabled community, yet she was reluctant to call for changes in the law for disabled individuals, she did not, for instance, work on behalf of anti-discrimination laws. While initially pushing back in her early advocacy, she reached a point when she went along with the perceived notion that she “overcame” her disabilities by sheer determination and a cheery attitude, suggesting and tacitly supporting the notion that others with disabilities could overcome their disabilities if they just tried hard enough.¹⁸ Keller could have done much more to push back against the perceptions of others that were based on her incredible and improbable success.

Yet Helen Keller lived to be 85 years old and was politically active for her entire adult life. These highlights give some insight to her priorities as an advocate for individuals that needed a strong voice. To bring enough nuance to her story, it is important to make students aware of her advocacy as well as some of the areas in which many would argue that she fell short in her political and social convictions. To only focus on the world that is depicted in *The Story of My Life* and *The Miracle Worker* would not properly ground Keller’s experiences in enough historical context to allow students to understand why she is an iconic historical actor. Nielsen (2009) makes a critical observation about Keller’s life story in *The Miracle Worker*, offering an inadvertent instructional warning to teachers:

Though theatrical and film versions of “The Miracle Worker” present Keller as a child, for 85 years she lived as long and complex a life as anyone in U.S. history. By remembering her primarily as a child we contribute to the dismissal of people with disabilities as perpetual children with no need of income, rights, or adult relationships.¹⁹

By making students aware of some of these issues before reading and viewing the texts, teachers will enhance the overall study by placing Keller in historical moments that evoke some of the historical tensions that exist within her beliefs. In the article “Helen Keller: Rethinking the Problematic Icon,” the author notes that Keller lived until old age but is viewed as a woman who lived in “the public imagination as an eternal child.”²⁰ By focusing only on *The Miracle Worker*, this perception will not be challenged for a student. Once you have muddied the instructional waters by showing the depths of Helen Keller as a person, you and your students will be ready for the fruits of your labor when you read and study the core texts of the unit.

The Source Text: *The Story of My Life*

Another key aspect of content knowledge that is necessary to teach this unit is understanding more about the source text of *The Miracle Worker*. *The Story of My Life* is the source text for *The Miracle Worker*. It is an autobiography that Helen Keller, Anne Sullivan and her husband wrote while Helen was in college to detail her childhood experiences. Critics have a lot to say about this text and its contributions to American literature; it is commonly excerpted and anthologized in many textbooks, including the textbook that I use with my students. Understanding some of the critical responses to the text can help a teacher to better understand the literary goals that Keller had, potentially enabling them to make connections to other areas of their curriculum. There

are many reasons why this text is canonical.

One critical response to *The Story of My Life* argues that Keller seeks to establish herself as a “cultural icon” and “national hero” in the text.²¹ Montgomery argues that Keller does this in her writing: by including photos of herself with other famous Americans like Mark Twain, writing about herself focusing on the uniquely American traits of industry and self-reliance, and using genre conventions of the ‘reconciliation romance’ in describing the relationship between herself (born in the South) and Sullivan (a Northerner) after the Civil War.²² Unfortunately, the genre of reconciliation romance retains some of the elements that seem to run counter to Keller’s worldview, since it includes maintaining strict racial hierarchies and traditional gender roles.²³ There are elements of this in *The Story of My Life*, where we learn that she grows up in a household with house servants that completely adhere to the expected racial hierarchy. Helen is also expected to fulfill traditional gender roles: what especially troubles Helen’s parents is that she is so difficult to control. This breaks with traditional expectations for young women. That is why her transformation under Anne Sullivan is welcomed by her parents, since she is able to make Helen adhere to traditional gender roles. How closely this text adheres to genre conventions would not be lost on contemporary readers.

Another critical reading of *The Story of My Life* argues that Keller depicts herself as a “practitioner of ‘the strenuous life;’” the strenuous life is a term created by Theodore Roosevelt to signify a life of effort and labor instead of living a life of ease.²⁴ Keller goes to great lengths in the book to describe how rigorous the work of learning words was with Anne Sullivan. She highlights the extreme effort that she made to be like others and overcome her difficulties. Keller admitted that the way she depicts her rapid language breakthrough in the text is not entirely accurate. This was also corroborated by Anne Sullivan’s letters describing how slow and involved the process was for Helen. There was not some magical unlocking of her language ability.²⁵ The adaptations of *The Miracle Worker* seize on and exacerbate this inaccurate initial language acquisition for dramatic purposes.

Reading and Performing Drama with Students

In my school, sixth grade serves as the year that students are introduced to drama as a genre. My students are very lucky to have a drama teacher and a dedicated drama class to support this instruction. Many students do not have the same opportunity to have ongoing drama instruction. Research indicates that drama helps students (especially English learners) learn vocabulary, build confidence, and work independently of the teacher to problem solve.²⁶ In a study during the late 1990’s of educational drama pedagogy in Washington, 82% of teachers surveyed found that educational drama was a valuable teaching strategy, but only six percent of teachers actually used drama daily in their instruction. The same results were evident in other locations as well.²⁷ So, the question is, if teachers find value in drama, then why aren’t they using more of it in their instruction? It is evident that many teachers are open to using elements of drama with their students, but may not have enough content-area knowledge about drama as a genre to teach the characteristics with accuracy, or they are not aware of best practices surrounding the effective use of drama in the English Language Arts classroom.

Theater art is a key element of the English Language Arts. In their white paper recommendations for all educational stakeholders, the California Educational Theater Association (CETA) makes several important recommendations related to drama instruction. In using and teaching drama, teachers must strive to teach students how to be seen and heard by the audience by using voice and body, to use appropriate body language to communicate effectively, and to sustain attention and focus during a performance.²⁸ These

recommendations are elaborated upon by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) who argue that quality drama instruction requires students to read background/source materials before they perform plays. Students should develop skill in thinking analytically and acting decisively and responsibly, and the CETA also argues that dramatic performances allow students to become involved in organized group activity that engages in shared problem-solving around either historic or contemporary events.²⁹ Incorporating drama also allows learners to inject their own cultural understanding into the story, using meaningful dialogue despite their perhaps having a limited vocabulary.³⁰ The goal of drama study and playful drama games should be to get students to better understand the point of view of others through role play and learn while performing rather than be concerned about a final production.³¹ Informal drama activity allows students to work together using their imagination in drama games or as they work together to stage scenes.

In addition to assigning roles and having students read specific parts of *The Miracle Worker*, specific suggestions for drama games and activities are made in the appendix to support literacy instruction during the unit.

Dramatic Version of *The Miracle Worker*

The Miracle Worker is a dramatic text that traces the relationship between Helen Keller and Annie Sullivan from Helen's birth until age 21. The text is an adaptation of Helen Keller's autobiography *The Story of My Life*. *The Miracle Worker* has been adapted to film twice: once in 1962 starring Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke and later as a Disney version in 2000. *The Miracle Worker* does not portray Helen in a way that is progressive or reflective of her achievements as an activist because it is focused exclusively on Helen's childhood.

Because the source text is problematic, *The Miracle Worker* carries the same problems over into both the drama and the film versions of the text. As stated earlier while focusing on *The Story of My Life*, there was no rapid language breakthrough. One of the climactic scenes in the drama and film involves Anne running water over Keller's hands and her realization that it is water. She then says "wah, wah" and begins to ask the names of other key terms, going so far to show that it is a miracle that she rings the bell.³² This rapid series of events is extremely melodramatic but did not occur in the same order in real life; Keller learned the word water a couple of weeks before and was merely reviewing the term in the famous scene in which she was transfixed at the pump. When Sullivan noted that a new light came over her face as she ran Helen's fingers through the water, she spelled water several times and began to ask the names of other nearby objects, learning thirty new words in the matter of hours; no "wah-wah" was muttered. Had the sounds "wah-wah" been spoken, it would have been a regression that would have invalidated the work that Sullivan was doing with Keller as it "panders to the prejudice that insists 'real language' has to be spoken and heard language."³³ This piece of information is important to bring to light for students because many know little about ASL and how it functions as a language. Keller did not become a type of label machine as *The Miracle Worker* may suggest; the fact that Keller already had language at the "wah-wah" moment further complicates this inaccurate image in the book and film. The film version retains many aspects of the play and at times even feels like a play being staged and filmed.

Importance of Film Literacy

Many teachers use film to enhance the instruction of curriculum across a variety of learning contexts. There are so many ways that film can enhance instruction that teachers must be selective and limit potential film selections. Since it is a widely used classroom resource, one would think that teachers have had significant professional development in using film effectively with students. This is not the case. In one study, roughly

68% of social studies teachers surveyed had no formal professional development that focused on the use of film in instruction.³⁴ This is problematic as many teachers are using film but have received no formal training in best practices in using film with students. This begs the question, what is best practice in using film with students? This question is further complicated by an instructional focus. Tomasulo (2001) argues that film is “simultaneously an art form, an economic institution, a cultural product, and a technology; only a dialectic survey course that shows how all parts interact can fully acquaint the beginning student.”³⁵ Before even considering the use of the film, the teacher should consider the instructional focus. Being mindful of the various angles of films that can be explored is important in any formal film literacy introduction for students. Some basic terminology is provided in the appendix for teachers.

Beyond the issue of teacher preparation, students also need to be primed for instruction that explores film in detail. Nielsen and Ferrara (2014) make a critical observation about the role of the student when presented with film: they note that students should be “active viewers of historical films rather than passive watchers of movie entertainment.”³⁶ This is accomplished by having students analyze, question and discuss film. In other words, teachers must strive to get students to be close viewers of film just as they strive to get students to be close readers of written texts. Film has instructional potential for students of all language ability levels; students with low skill levels that are otherwise restricted from many aspects of the English curriculum can thrive with film while high achievers can explore concepts beyond those that they can articulate with written or spoken language.³⁷ With that in mind, it is important to briefly trace some key ideas about film literacy.

In thinking about the relationship between the languages of literature and film, it is important to consider how the processes are alike. Reading literature and viewing film are alike as both processes require an investment of time to unlock meaning; both mediums can also be discussed with attention to organization, editing, tone, genre and subject matter. As Cahir notes, both literature and film are compositions that are put together, literature in sentences and paragraphs and film in shots and scenes.³⁸ This is critical because film can act as a temporary instructional scaffold for students to grow comfortable speaking about compositional choices before they are expected to read a text that may present challenges. This extra attention paid to discussing film choices should carry over to conversations about a literary text.

When thinking specifically about the adaptation of a play or drama into film, it is important to observe how similar both mediums are in terms of having actors that are focused on using body language to perform a script. Cahir observes that both mediums use “sets, sound effects, lighting, costumes, directors, producers...[and] move the audience from one sequence to another.”³⁹ This cannot be underestimated in *The Miracle Worker*. The same actors that performed the stage version of the play in 1959 were retained to be in the film version. This is important because the film director had a choice and considered other individuals to play Anne and Helen. It was determined by the director that both actors were the best choices for the roles, so they were retained for the highly successful film.⁴⁰ This speaks to the performance of both Patty Duke and Anne Bancroft and could be an interesting point to bring up with students while discussing the film. In looking at their performance in film, there are many aspects worth exploring with students.

Film Adaptation of *The Miracle Worker*

In seminar, we discussed the concept of catharsis while watching film. Khan defines catharsis as “an emotional cleansing or purification where emotional tension is released after an overwhelming vicarious experience.”⁴¹ For a film viewer to feel catharsis, the viewer needs to feel identification with the character. We need to be drawn in as viewers. This is achieved in the film version of *The Miracle Worker* in several scenes. In

the film, several select scenes reflect careful execution to establish mood or help the viewer to build empathy for Anne and Helen. In this way, it is evident that the film version of the source text adds to and amplifies the story, in doing so bringing Keller's story to a wider audience than her autobiography or the stage version of the play. There are several key scenes in the film adaptation that merit close viewing and class discussion with students.

In many ways, the film adaptation of *The Miracle Worker* is a literal translation of the source text. Cahir defines a literal translation as a film that strives to reproduce the plot and all its details as closely as possible to the letter of the book.⁴² Even though many scenes of the film feel like a literal translation, I would argue that there are several areas in which there are elements of traditional translation. A traditional translation seeks to maintain the overall traits of the book but change small details when needed.⁴³ In these scenes, the film uses elements of film to enhance and heighten the drama. In showing the film to students, I believe the scenes below are worth stopping over and discussing with students because they demonstrate interesting uses of film as a medium. In some cases, the film is using interesting editing choices to juxtapose images that wouldn't normally go together for effect. In others, it is the use of shots and fades that make Anne Sullivan's motivations and insecurities evident. The follow scenes are listed with the timestamp to help you know when to anticipate them for the purposes of class discussion.

Opening Sequence ⁴⁴



The film version starts with Anne fumbling for the stairs.⁴⁵

She is literally walking in shadows that shroud her steps. This metaphor could signify many things and would be fun to speculate about with students; I believe that it suggests that she must learn to live within those shadows by taking small steps forward into the unknown, slowly pushing forward. The use of lighting to create the shadows is extremely effective. This slow move also establishes conflict before the film begins; you know the impact that blindness has on Keller before the film starts. From there, the montage moves to Helen outside and getting caught up in laundry that is been hung outside to dry. Unlike the shadows, bright white sheets wrap Keller up and frustrate her. Again, this shows that the issues that she had on the stairs did not signal an isolated conflict; it also shows that Helen's mother loves Helen, as she dotes on her and calms her down when she gets caught up in the sheets. The last part of the opening montage of the credits shows Helen's reflection in a Christmas ornament hanging on a tree in the Keller living room. Again, she fumbles with it and drops it on the floor, which shatters the ornament. In viewing it, the viewer cannot help but think about our own vision being shattered as her reflection disappears from the shattering ornament.

The credits end and the film's narrative opens. In the scene above, Captain Keller has just seen the doctor out of the door. Helen is an infant and has been ill and Kate, Helen's mother, is fawning over the unresponsive infant. In one of the more interesting film shots, the viewer is allowed to see from the perspective of Helen. It

is a slightly ironic shot in that respect, and the viewer cannot help but feel overwhelmed by Kate's response to the realization that her child is deaf and blind. Kate's change in affect allows the viewer to consider how he or she might feel should they find out that a loved one instantaneously loses their vision or hearing. We cannot help but feel the mother's anguish because of her deafening scream for her husband and the panicked expressions that both demonstrate when they find Helen to be unresponsive.

Dinner Table ⁴⁶



One of these key scenes, if not the key scene in the film is the dinner table scene.⁴⁷

In this part of the film, the Keller family is seated around the family table eating breakfast. Anne Sullivan, still relatively new to the household, is observing Helen casually going around the table plate-by-plate and grabbing food from everyone's plate rather than eating from her own plate. By the time that Helen makes way to where Anne Sullivan is seated, Helen is shocked to find that Anne refuses Helen's hand grabbing for her plate and proceeds to tackle her to the floor. The Keller family, unable and unaccustomed to disciplining Anne out of "pity," is kicked out of the room so Anne can discipline Helen in a scene that shocks the viewer in its intense physicality. The viewer is drawn into the struggle between Helen and Anne, knowing that Anne cares enough to discipline Helen in a way that will change her behavior. As Helen and Anne wrestle, the camera follows them intently. With the camera movement tracking them closely, the eyes of the viewer are forced to do the same. In this opening exchange, Anne's physicality demonstrates a form of tough love.

Anne Chokes Doll ⁴⁸



In another instance at roughly 28:50, the viewer encounters Anne choking Helen's doll after an instance in which Helen has demonstrated unsavory behavior and Anne has had to physically discipline her.⁴⁹

On the surface, Helen is starting to try Anne's patience, but this isn't exactly the case. Leading up to Anne choking Helen's doll, it is Helen's mother Kate who exacerbates Anne's frustration. Helen was given needlework to do by Anne and uses the needle to stab Anne. Helen's mother happens to walk in the room and inadvertently rewards Helen for her misdeed; Kate was trying to avoid a tantrum by giving Helen a treat. This causes Anne extreme frustration, as she feels the family's efforts are undermining her progress with Helen. The viewer empathizes with Anne, as she has struggled throughout the film as an advocate for Helen's intellectual growth only to be forced to struggle with Helen's parents as well as Helen. At this point in the film, Anne has demonstrated almost saint-like patience. After the exchange in which she has finally quelled Helen's outburst, the viewer cannot help but share Anne's frustration. The viewer sees the efforts that the Kellers cannot see and recognizes that her efforts, even though they are extremely forceful, are in the best interests of Helen.

Anne Reminded of Her Past ⁵⁰



Starting at roughly 40:30, Anne is reminded of her past experiences of being blind herself as well as of final interactions that she had with her brother Jimmy.⁵¹

The use of fades and creative reflections to signify Anne's memories in the form of flashbacks is effective in helping the viewer to understand more about Anne's motivations as a character. From the fades, we learn that Anne struggled with blindness in some of the same ways as Helen. It paints Anne's rough-and-tumble actions as being a product of her caring about Anne. This scene, along with several others, use the reflection on the glass to portray Anne's interactions with Helen as part of her life journey. She sees elements of Helen reflected in her own past; the fade out to Helen after flashing back to Anne's experiences when she was blind is particularly impactful. In other parts of the film, Anne's actions are impacted by haunting reflections of her brother in her glasses. The filmmaker does a masterful job of using fades to signify changes in time.

Egg Hatching Still ⁵²



At roughly 1:06 in the film, there is a sequence of events that engenders a warmth between Anne and Helen that is incredibly satisfying for the viewer.⁵³

There are a lot of reasons why this scene is immensely satisfying for the viewer. It allows for the warmth that Anne demonstrates towards Helen to be on full display without her interrupting it with an outburst. For nearly an hour, the viewer has watched Helen frustratingly thwart many of Anne's efforts to teach her more than just obedience. It is a highly symbolic move that represents the relationship that Anne has cultivated with Helen; their relationship is literally hatching. This is the first point in the film that Helen smiles in a way that is genuine; for the viewer it feels like Helen is on the cusp of something worthwhile.

Classroom Activities

Please see the introduction for the suggested framework of instruction. Below are three activities that will be briefly incorporated into that framework to enhance and enrich instruction of this unit.

Walk It Like I Talk It

In this lesson, I mention the title of the song. It is a graphic rap song that many of my students in my classes are familiar with. It is about being big and bad with both language and attitude. With that said, please look at the lyrics before you make mention of the title to ensure that it is appropriate for your school community.

In the song, the refrain is "walk it like I talk it." I will start the lesson by sharing that this song has an important message about how we should tackle reading and performing drama. The class will do a shared

read of Act 1 Scene 1 of *A Raisin in the Sun*. One of the most dramatic parts of the scene is the main character, Walter, telling his wife Ruth about an investment that he wants to make in a liquor store, an investment that his family doesn't support. Ruth, his wife, tells him to, "Eat your eggs." Walter erupts.

With my students, I will share that when I taught this text to my eighth graders several years ago, I had a wonderful student that struggled to read and perform Walter's character because she couldn't "walk it like I talk it." In other words, she read Walter's section in a monotone and her actions in performing it in class did not match the anger that Walter felt. We will use that section of text in *A Raisin in the Sun* to discuss what characters feel in this drama and how that influences our reading of the text. The goal of this exercise would be to carry over the same focus into our reading of *The Miracle Worker*.

Big Paper Activity

There are many names for this activity such as "silent conversation" or "gallery walk." It consists of having students rotate around different stations that use large poster-sized Post-It notes that have important quotes and information for students to respond to using smaller Post-It notes underneath or even directly write on the poster. After sharing their thoughts on several, students will respond to the thinking of their classmates. In the resources section of the unit, there is a link to an explanation and visual example from Facing History and Ourselves of what this looks like in action.

Here are four pieces of information and questions about Helen Keller that I would include on separate posters that would get kids thinking and responding critically:

- Helen Keller's dad was a Captain in the Confederate Army (South) during the Civil War. What type of impact do you think this might have had on Helen's childhood?
- Mark Twain was an important figure in Helen Keller's life. He contacted a friend to pay for Helen's school and wrote a recommendation for a book that she wrote. What do you think of Twain's actions?
- Keller fell in love with her secretary and almost got married, but her family forbade this because she was disabled. It was a major regret in her life. What do you think about this?
- Keller was investigated by the FBI for some of her political views. She was outspoken about issues like being against war and believing in Socialism that many in government didn't believe in at that time. Some in government were afraid that because she was so popular that people might listen to her views. What do you think about this?

I would have students respond to three that interest them and respond to two of their classmate's thoughts. Then I would have kids go back and read the responses that other people wrote to their original thinking.

Columbian Hypnosis

This is the name of a drama game that would be extremely appropriate given the subject of the unit. This activity was modelled for me by a visiting drama teacher. It consists of students working in pairs to take turns leading one person around following the other person's hand. Students are asked to act as if the hand has hypnotized them and they must follow the hand accordingly. This drama game helps students to focus and may help them consider Helen's limitations in a different way.

Resources

Helpful Film Terminology from Seminar

fade	a gradual transition from one image to another
shot	the camera has a certain position-as soon as there is a cut that ends one shot another shot begins
takes	how many times it takes to get the right shot
high angle shot	camera is positioned up above looking down
low angle shot	camera is positioned down looking up
mise-en-scene	the artistic aspect of the setting-costuming and set-setting the scene, lighting, sound
montage	the process of selecting, editing, and piecing together different parts of film to form a whole unit
backlighting	done to blot out or highlight faces or other parts of the set for effect
tracking shot	the camera moving very slowly across any space
extreme close up	a close up to the point of abstracting the image

Helpful Websites

<https://www.afb.org/HelenKellerArchive>

This website is filled with primary sources from Helen Keller’s archives. There is contact information for further inquiries. There are also links to Anne Sullivan’s museum as well as to the Helen Keller Kids Museum.

<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/big-paper-silent-conversation>

This website contains a detailed lesson plan for a big paper activity along with a visual of what it looks like.

<http://dbp.theatredance.utexas.edu/node/20>

This is the website with a detailed explanation of the Columbian Hypnosis drama game.

Notes

1. Kim Nielsen. “Using Biography to Teach Disability History,” 41-44
2. “Twain,” Chicago Public Schools
3. “English Language Arts Standards,” Common Core State Standards, 2018
4. Ibid
5. W.R. Black. “Helen Keller Jokes, Body and Soul,” 1167-1179
6. J.C. Quicke. “‘Speaking Out’: The Political Career of Helen Keller”
7. Ibid
8. Ibid
9. Ibid

10. "Helen Keller Biography." Assessment Considerations for Students Who Are Blind and Visually Impaired-American Foundation for the Blind
11. Robert McClory. "Freedom Depends on One's Willingness to Be Outraged," 22-29
12. Ibid
13. William Gibson, *The Miracle Worker*
14. Kim Nielsen, *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller*, 24-28
15. "Helen Keller." Biography.com
16. J.C. Quicke. "'Speaking Out': The Political Career of Helen Keller"
17. Ibid
18. Kim Nielsen, *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller*, 24-28
19. Ibid
20. Liz Crow. "Helen Keller: Rethinking the Problematic Icon," 845-859
21. Travis Montgomery. "Radicalizing Reunion: Helen Keller's "The Story of My Life" and Reconciliation Romance," 34-51
22. Ibid
23. Ibid
24. Ibid
25. Justin Leiber. "Helen Keller as Cognitive Scientist," 419-440
26. Chris Boudreault. "The Benefits of Using Drama in the ESL/EFL Classroom"
27. L.L. Lang. "To Open our Minds More Freely," 48-62
28. Carolyn Elder, et al. "CETA Position Paper"
29. Ibid
30. Christa Greenfader, et al. "Boosting Language Skills of English Learners Through Dramatization and Movement," 171-180.
31. Carolyn Elder, et al. "CETA Position Paper"
32. Justin Leiber. "Helen Keller as Cognitive Scientist," 419-440
33. Ibid
34. Greg Nielsen and Margaret Ferrara. "Integration of Multicultural Video Strategies That Transform Entertainment into Historical Film Literacy," 223-228
35. Frank Tomasulo, "What Kind of Film History Do We Teach?"
36. Greg Nielsen and Margaret Ferrara. "Integration of Multicultural Video Strategies The Transform Entertainment into Historical Film Literacy," 223-228
37. Marc Barrett. "Film Literacy-the Power of Images"
38. Linda Cahir, *Literature into Film: Theory and Practical Approaches*, 45
39. Linda Cahir, *Literature into Film: Theory and Practical Approaches*, 144-145
40. Mary Melear. "The Miracle Worker."
41. Fariha Khan. "Catharsis in Shakespeare's Major Tragedies"
42. Linda Cahir, *Literature into Film: Theory and Practical Approaches*, 144-145
43. Ibid
44. *The Miracle Worker*, dir. Arthur Penn, screenplay by William Gibson, Opening Sequence
45. *The Miracle Worker*, dir. Arthur Penn, screenplay by William Gibson
46. *The Miracle Worker*, dir. Arthur Penn, screenplay by William Gibson, The Dinner Table Still
47. *The Miracle Worker*, dir. Arthur Penn, screenplay by William Gibson
48. *The Miracle Worker*, dir. Arthur Penn, screenplay by William Gibson, Anne Chokes Doll Still
49. Ibid
50. *The Miracle Worker*, dir. Arthur Penn, screenplay by William Gibson, Anne is Reminded of Her Past Still
51. *The Miracle Worker*, dir. Arthur Penn, screenplay by William Gibson
52. *The Miracle Worker*, dir. Arthur Penn, screenplay by William Gibson, The Egg Hatching Still

53. *The Miracle Worker*, dir. Arthur Penn, screenplay by William Gibson

Bibliography

Barrett, Marc. "Film Literacy – the Power of Images." Australian Council for Educational Research - ACER. December 09, 2015. Accessed June 24, 2018.

<https://www.teachermagazine.com.au/articles/film-literacy-the-power-of-images>.

Black, W. R. (2014), "Helen Keller Jokes, Body and Soul." *J Pop Cult*, 47: 1167-1179.

doi:10.1111/jpcu.12204

Boudreault, Chris. "The Benefits of Using Drama in the ESL/EFL Classroom." *The Benefits of Using Drama in the ESL/EFL Classroom*. Accessed July 15, 2018.

<http://iteslj.org/Articles/Boudreault-Drama.html>.

Cahir, Linda Costanzo. *Literature into Film: Theory and Practical Approaches*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006.

Crow, Liz (2000) "Helen Keller: Rethinking the Problematic Icon," *Disability & Society*, 15:6, 845-859, DOI: 10.1080/713662010

Detmering, Robert. 2010. "Exploring the Political Dimensions of Information Literacy through Popular Film." *Portal: Libraries And The Academy* 10, no. 3: 265-282. *ERIC*, EBSCOhost(accessed June 22, 2018).

Elder, Carolyn, Carol Hovey, Gai Jones, and Amanda Swann. "CETA Position Paper." Cetoweb.org. Accessed July 15, 2018.

http://www.cetoweb.org/pdf/CETA_Position_Paper.pdf.

"English Language Arts Standards » Reading: Literature » Grade 6." English Language Arts Standards Common Core State Standards Initiative. Accessed June 24, 2018.

<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/6/>.

Gibson, William. *The Miracle Worker*. New York: Samuel French, 2010.

Greenfader, Christa Mulker, and Liane Brouillette. "Boosting Language Skills of English Learners Through Dramatization and Movement." *The Reading Teacher* 67, no. 3 (2013): 171-80. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24573649>.

Hansberry, Lorraine. *A Raisin in the Sun*. Oxford: Benediction Classics, 2017.

"Helen Keller." Biography.com. February 27, 2018. Accessed July 14, 2018. <https://www.biography.com/people/helen-keller-9361967>.

"Helen Keller Biography." Assessment Considerations for Students Who Are Blind and Visually Impaired - American Foundation for the Blind. Accessed July 15, 2018. <http://www.afb.org/info/about-us/helen-keller/biography-and-chronology/biography/1235>.

Khan, Fariha. "Catharsis in Shakespeare's Major Tragedies." *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies*. January 03, 2015. Accessed July 17, 2018. <http://ijelr.in/2.1.15/FARIHAKHAN128-130.pdf>.

Lang, L. L. (1999). "To Open our Minds More Freely": Educational drama and the common curriculum framework for english language arts. *English Quarterly*, 31(3), 48-62. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/233295237?accountid=15172>

Leiber, Justin (1996). "Helen Keller as Cognitive Scientist," *Philosophical Psychology*, 9:4, 419-440, DOI: 10.1080/09515089608573193

Melear, Mary. ""The Miracle Worker." Turner Classic Movies. Accessed July 16, 2018. <http://www.tcm.com/this-month/article/27893|0/The-Miracle-Worker.html>.

Montgomery, Travis. "Radicalizing Reunion: Helen Keller's "The Story of My Life" and Reconciliation Romance." *The Southern Literary Journal* 42, no. 2 (2010): 34-51. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41057640>.

McClory, Robert "Freedom Depends on One's Willingness to Be Outraged," *Student Lawyer* 10, no. 2 (October 1981): 22-29

Nielsen, Greg, and Margaret M. Ferrara. 2014. "Integration of Multicultural Video Strategies That Transform Entertainment into Historical Film Literacy." *Multicultural Perspectives*

16, no. 4: 223-228. *ERIC*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 21, 2018).

Nielsen, Kim E. (2009) "Using Biography to Teach Disability History," *OAH Magazine of History*, Volume 23, Issue 3, 1 July 2009, Pages 41-44,

<https://doi.org/10.1093/maghis/23.3.41>

Nielsen, Kim E. *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2004.

"Patty Duke, Andrew Prine and Anne Bancroft." Listal.com. Accessed July 13, 2018.

Dinner Table Fight Image

Quicke, J. C. "'Speaking Out': The Political Career of Helen Keller." Accessed July 14, 2018.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/02674648866780151?needAccess=true&>.

The Miracle Worker. Directed by Arthur Penn. Screenplay by William Gibson. Performed by Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke. Youtube. November 17, 2016. Accessed July 17, 2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8wDPCAmAPA>.

Tomasulo, Frank P. 2001. "What Kind of Film History Do We Teach?: The Introductory Survey Course as a Pedagogical Opportunity." *Cinema Journal* 41, no. 1: 110. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost(accessed June 25, 2018).

"Twain," Chicago Public Schools, accessed June 18, 2018,

<http://schoolinfo.cps.edu/schoolprofile/schooldetails.aspx?SchoolId=610206>.

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

©2023 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University, All Rights Reserved. Yale National Initiative®, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute®, On Common Ground®, and League of Teachers Institutes® are registered trademarks of Yale University.

For terms of use visit https://teachers.yale.edu/terms_of_use