

Silenced in a Silent World: The Politically Active Life of Helen Keller and why it Has Been Forgotten

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Amidst darkness and silence, Helen Keller spoke emphatically about her observations of the world around her. Although it rarely was, her voice was not a spoken one, but a written one. Found in the forms of bubbles of Braille, a statement was made that defended that all people deserved equal treatment. “We must fight for the deliverance of the oppressed, the beaten, the betrayed, and the plundered,” wrote Helen Keller.¹ These words were only a few of many that she used to profess her opinions.

When the average person looks back on the life of Helen Keller, they remember the story as depicted in the film *The Miracle Worker*. There is a specific scene in which Patty Duke (Helen Keller) and Anne Bancroft (Anne Sullivan) are at a water pump and Helen is able to speak the word “water” for the first time. The scene is imprinted into cinema history as well as many of the public’s minds about the life of Helen Keller. However, her legacy after this moment comes to an abrupt stop. Readers and viewers picture her as a child who overcame almost impossible obstacles of being in darkness and silence, yet her story ends there. It is known that she made speeches and wrote books, but what did she say? Now she is the subject of brutally distasteful jokes of sophomoric humor about the deaf and blind. In a sense, this is how film and children’s books distort the image of her.

¹ Anne Hagedorn, *Savage Peace: Hope and Fear in America, 1919* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 341.



After America had come out of the First World War, some Americans began to question the government and the treatment of its citizens regarding rights. One of these outspoken people was Keller. She was an active participant in socialism, social movements, Swedenborg philosophy, and an active member in the Industrial Workers of the World. The revolutionary wing of the Socialist Party allowed her to participate in said causes. However, powerful government bureaucrats that did not share the same political perspectives as the revolutionary wing sought to bring them down. This not only created

conflict externally, but internally into the party. As the Socialist party's commitment to revolution began to collapse and the Industrial Workers of the World were persecuted, Keller lost her connections to the workers movement and eventually became isolated within the social arena. Thus, her active efforts and influence over reform were silenced and eventually forgotten.

ANCESTRY AND EARLY LIFE

Born in Tuscumbia, a northern town in Alabama on June 27, 1880, Helen was the daughter of Arthur Keller, a former captain in the Confederate Army, and her mother, Kate Adams, Arthur's second and much younger wife (she was twenty-two and he was forty-two). The family on her father's side was native to Switzerland, particularly the immigrant Caspar Keller who made his first move from the home country to Maryland.² When looking into the Keller family history, it is not hard to find irony in Keller's family past. In fact, a member of her family back in Zurich, Switzerland was the first teacher of the deaf and went on to write about the subject of educating the particular handicap. The coincidence was even recognized by Keller who wrote "though it is true that there is no king who has not had a slave among his ancestors, and no slave who had not a king among his."³

Keller's writing is also ironic when addressing that her family owned a plantation and her family defended a Confederacy that depended on the institution of slavery. However, Keller's mother was a Northerner at heart. Her father was related to the Adams

² Dorothy Herrmann, *Helen Keller: A Life* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 9.

³ Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life* (Garden City : Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1954), 23.

family of New England who eventually moved to Arkansas and fought for the South during the war. Kate's mother was related to the Everett family, Edward Everett to be exact, who spoke on the same platform on the Battle of Gettysburg's Remembrance Day as Abraham Lincoln. Then there was Edward Everett Hale who wrote "The Man Without A Country," which was an allegory of the Civil War that was written to strengthen the Union cause.⁴

Helen Keller's family history had an important impact on her early development and recollection of her past. Some were even referred to in her writings. She recalled fondly stories of Casper Keller's son, who purchased land in Alabama and decided to make his home there. Pleasant and vivid accounts of Helen's grandfather tell stories about his traveling on horseback between Tuscumbia and Philadelphia to purchase supplies for his plantation. Keller's grandmother was equally as interesting. She was the daughter of the war veteran, Lafayette's aide Alexander Moore, the granddaughter of the early Colonial Governor of Virginia, and she was second cousin to Robert E. Lee.

After the Civil War had ended, the Keller homestead which consisted of a large square room and a smaller one, in which the servant slept, was built by her father shortly after he and her mother had gotten married. The family home was called "Ivy Green" because the house, trees, and fences were covered with English ivy. The old-fashioned garden was a paradise to Helen. Her recollections of her brief period of sight were of the garden and all its flowers and vines. Arthur made a living as a cotton plantation owner and editor of a local newspaper while Kate grew vegetables and other crops to save money for the household. Arthur had apparent shortcomings shortly after their marriage despite his Southern prestige and Kate regretted the marriage, but stuck to her life duties which set an example to Helen.

⁴ Dorothy Herrmann, 9.

The beginning of her life was much like many of first born babies in their families. As Helen stated, “I came, I saw, I conquered.”⁵ She was to be originally named Helen Everett, after her mother’s maiden name. However, on her father’s way to Church to baptize the child, he suddenly forgot the name and decided to call her Helen Adams after his family name. Despite the difference, Helen’s parents showed her love and compassion beyond all others. Keller was a very happy and normal child who loved to play and explore. She was able to walk within the first year of her life and took to communication very quickly.

She began imitating people at a young age where she would mimic everything that she saw people do. She was able to say “How d’ye” and “tea” quite easily. Also, “water” was a word that Keller would remember even after losing her hearing.⁶ This year and a half of sound and sight gave Keller a basis of communication to the outside world. She was able to remember who the people around her were.

Helen was plunged to an unconsciousness that she was not fully able to recover from in the month of February. It was called an acute congestion of the stomach and brain that mysteriously caused her to have a high fever for a long period of time and was most likely brought on by scarlet fever. The family doctor told her parents that she was not going to live past the fever. One morning, she woke up and the fever had broken. During her recovery she noticed that the natural light around her became dim and dimmer everyday to the point that she forgot what light was like. After she spent the first nineteen months of her life playing in green fields and flowers, she now faced a lifetime of darkness.

⁵ Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life* (Garden City : Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1954), 24.

⁶ Hermann, 6.

After she had lost her sight, her means of communicating were mostly through her mother. Her days were spent clinging to her mother's apron. Her hands were in constant movement around her for observation. Her means of communicating were through her own variation of signs, such as a nod of her head which meant "Yes," a shake that meant "No," and a push that meant "Go." Sometimes she would even act out cutting slices to bread and buttering them to explain that she wanted bread and butter. She would even result in pantomiming shivering to indicate that she wanted ice-cream.⁷

Despite her dark and silent life, she understood a great deal of what was going on around her. She was able to fold and put away clothes after they were cleaned by the age of five. She also had come to the realization that people did not communicate in the same way that she had. Helen constantly had her hands out, touching what was around her. She would place her hands on the faces of others and noticed that their lips and tongue would move to communicate with one another. When her family and friends did not use the same signs of speech as she did, she wanted to do the same. Thus, she entered into years of misunderstanding and confusion that cause her to become vexed.

She became very aggravated by not being able to communicate. When she failed to get what she wanted she acted out by kicking and expressing her temper in fits. During her kicking fits she would literally flail about the room. She once lit herself on fire by coming too close to the hearth in her sitting-room. She found comfort in an unlikely daughter of the household cook, a black girl named Martha Washington, who understood what Helen wanted and would give it to her. Instant gratification spoiled Helen and she enjoyed being spoiled. When Helen was about five, her family had grown to the size that included her two older-half brothers and her little sister, Mildred. She became so jealous of Mildred because she knew that her mother's attention was not completely dedicated to

⁷ Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life* (Garden City : Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1954), 27.

herself. She saw Mildred as nothing less than an intruder. As time went on however, Mildred showed her love and companionship through tender affections and they went on to become close friends.

Keller's fits never came to an end when she got older. Outbursts could occur daily, sometimes hourly in a frantic effort to express herself. The few signs that she had used were becoming inadequate to explain what she needed. In an attempt to make herself understood, she would have various bouts of outbursts. The family did not know what she wanted and Helen would explode in anger more and more. Her parents grieved because they were unable to help her. Their perplexity was worsened because they lived a long distance away from any school for the blind or deaf. They became discouraged at the fact that no one was willing to travel as far as Tuscumbia to teach her.

Her friends and family did not believe that Helen could be taught and that she would forever remain a child who depended solely on others. The only chance of hope that anyone had around her came from her mother. Kate Keller had read Charles Dickens's "American Notes." In it, she had read the account of a young woman, Laura Bridgman, who was both deaf and blind and had been educated. In the writing, there was a doctor who had discovered how to teach the affliction.⁸ Kate despaired once she found out that the doctor had been dead for quite sometime and feared that his methods had died along with him.

Still, her parents never gave up. When Helen was six years old, they took her to a famous oculist, Dr. Chisholm, in the Baltimore area to see if anything could be done to her eyes. The doctor was unable to do anything for her eyes because they had been permanently damaged by her fever, but he did believe that Helen could be educated. He

⁸ Charles Dickens, *American Notes*, 32 and 38. The doctor that Dickens's refers to is Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, who taught the finger alphabet method which helped Laura Bridgman achieve mental growth in the span of twelve months.

advised her parents to contact Alexander Graham Bell of Washington, D.C., an eminent scientist who worked with elocution and speech. Chisholm told the Keller's that Bell would be able to give them information about schools and teachers for blind and deaf children.

After a consultation with Dr. Bell, Helen fell in love with him instantly not only because of his life achievements, which had been admirable, but because of his sympathy and gentleness with her. He examined her by placing her on his knee and making gestures onto her palm. Keller felt like she found someone who understood her signs, and for that she was grateful.⁹ Following this examination would be a lifelong friendship that Keller would have with the man. She credited him with allowing her to pass from the darkness into the light. Through him, she was able to understand knowledge, companionship, and friendship in her darkened state.

It was Alexander Graham Bell who advised Arthur to contact the director of the Perkins Institution and Massachusetts School for the Blind in Boston, Dr. Anagnos. It was at this institution that the doctor in Dickens's novel treated the young woman, Dr. Howe; his methods were still taught there. Dr. Anagnos was able to help at once and knew it was possible to find a competent teacher to begin Helen's education. Within a few weeks of their first contact, Anagnos had found a teacher in the summer of 1886. Her name was Anne Sullivan, and she was expected to arrive the following year.

Keller was lucky in that she came from a family with the prestige of a Southern name and wealth. She had the blessing of being able to see and hear in the early year of her life, which enabled her to understand at a higher rate of what was going on around her. With her family's money and friends, she was able to receive the education that

⁹ Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life* (Garden City : Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1954), 34.

properly suited her needs. This was also the start of her connections with important people in America, such as Alexander Graham Bell. People such as Bell would enable her to become outspoken in her thoughts and feelings.

EDUCATION

Helen would recall that the most important day in all of her life was the day that her teacher, Anne Mansfield Sullivan, came to her. Anne had lost some of her sight by scarring due to a bacterial infection at an early age. Not that dissimilar from Helen, she knew what it was like to struggle with sight. She had entered the Perkins Institution and graduated as valedictorian. Anne first came to teach Helen on March 3, 1887, several months before Helen's seventh birthday. She moved into the house with the family bearing gifts for Helen. Anne gave her a doll from the blind children at Perkins which had been dressed by none other than Laura Bridgman. Helen loved the present and began playing with it immediately. Miss Sullivan spelled the word "d-o-l-l" into Helen's hand. Helen could not comprehend the actual meaning of the world at first, but she was able to learn to spell certain words such as pin, hat, sit, stand, and walk.¹⁰

As Helen had not seen anything since she was nineteen months old, she did not grasp the meaning of words. She felt things, but never reasoned as to what objects were. Again, she resorted to outbursts of frustrations because she did not understand. During one of her fits, Sullivan took Keller out to the well-house where a house servant had been running water. Miss Sullivan took Keller's hand, placed it under the spout, and poured water over it. Sullivan motioned the word "w-a-t-e-r" in her hand numerous times. In a letter dated April 5, 1887, Anne Sullivan described the day:

¹⁰ Ibid, 57.

I must write to you a line this morning because something has happened. Helen has taken the second great step in her education. *She has learned that everything has a name and that the manual alphabet is the key to everything she wants to know.* All the way back to the house she was highly excited, and learned the name of every object she touched. Last night when I got in bed, she stole into my arms of her own accord and kissed me for the first time, and I thought my heart would burst, so full was it of joy.¹¹

Keller would eventually describe this as her soul's awakening out of the darkness.¹² It was just the beginning of Helen's learning of life, reading, and writing.

Anne Sullivan taught Helen one of the most important lessons outside the regular realm of education: love. "Love is something like the clouds that were in the sky before the sun came out," Sullivan once told her. "You cannot touch the clouds, you know, but you feel the rain. You cannot touch love either, but you feel the sweetness that it pours into everything. Without love you would not be happy or want to play."¹³

In the Spring of 1890, Helen began taking lessons on speech. She was influenced by one of Laura Bridgman's teachers, Mrs. Lamson, who had taught a deaf and blind girl how to speak in Norway. In Keller's own driven mind, she decided that she too would learn how to speak. She was recommended to Miss Sarah Fuller who used a method by passing the student's hand over the teacher's face to feel the position of the mouth when the teacher made a sound.¹⁴

In 1894, she left for New York City to attend the Wright-Humason School for the Deaf for the purpose of obtaining vocal culture and lip-reading. There, she spent the next

¹¹ Letter from Anne Sullivan, April 5, 1887 in *The Story of my Life* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc.), 256-257.

¹² Helen Keller, *Optimism: An Essay* (New York: C.P. Cromwell and Company, 1903), 14.

¹³ Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1954), 41.

¹⁴ "Miss Sullivan's Account of Miss Keller's Speech" in *The Story of my Life* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1954), 328. Some further details appear in a more detailed account that Anne Sullivan wrote for the Perkins Institution Report of 1891.

two years learning math, geography, French, and German.¹⁵ Immediately following her time at Wright-Humason, she entered the Cambridge School for Young Ladies in 1896, in preparation to her entrance into Radcliffe College. For a woman of her age and disability, Keller was the most unconventional student at the school.

She entered Radcliffe in 1900 and soon realized that the college institution did not meet her high expectations. Time for leisure, pleasure reading, and pondering was to be put on the back burner during the strenuous schedule of classes and schoolwork. She wrote “One goes to college to learn, it seems, not to think.”¹⁶

There were many other important individuals that had an impact in Keller’s education. One of these people was Mr. Laurence Hutton, a friend that she made while she lived in New York. Keller made occasional visits to Mr. Hutton’s and his wife’s home. Mrs. Hutton became a friend and confidant during Keller’s rough transition into college. The Huttons were the ones who introduced Keller to the literary great, Mark Twain.¹⁷ Twain felt great sympathy for Keller and was willing to share his writings with her. He believed that she could succeed educationally and helped fund her college tuition. Twain’s influence over her education would eventually transition in the political opinions of her adult career.

Whilst she spent her time at Radcliffe, she became influenced by English compositions such as the Bible, Elizabethan literature, Shakespeare, history, and philosophy. In her world, literature was her Utopia. In great works of writing, she was not disenfranchised. There was no obstacle of lost-senses; books did not judge who she was. There in perfect happiness, Keller found harmony with written matter. She graduated from Radcliffe with a Bachelor of Arts in 1904.

¹⁵ Helen Keller, *The Story of my Life* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1954), 74.

¹⁶ Herrmann, 124.

¹⁷ Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1954), 114.

WRITINGS AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM

The main form of expression that came out of Helen Keller was her writing. The majority of her writings were based on her disability and her political and social opinions as seen in *The World I Live In*, *Out of the Dark*, and *Why I Became a Socialist*.

Her first professional venture into writing was “The Frost King,” a story that Keller wrote in the autumn after she learned to speak. She had sent the story to the Perkins Institution for the Blind, but it eventually was caught up in trouble concerning the actual creator of the story. Keller wrote that she came up with the story after taking a trip in Autumn with Anne Sullivan. Sullivan had described to her the foliage of the fall and Helen began writing a story inspired by what Sullivan had described to her. Keller was so happy with her work that after she sent it to Perkins it was published with one of the institution’s reports. However, Helen was alerted quickly of a story by a similar name, “The Frost Fairies,” by Margaret T. Canby. She was brought before a court comprised of teachers at the Institution. Sullivan was forced to leave her side and she was questioned to judge whether or not the story was ever read to her.¹⁸

Although Keller had not remembered it, she must have been read the story when she was younger. She came to the realization that she had plagiarized and felt deeply disgraced by the matter. She still denied ever reading the book and her teachers and companions never recalled reading her the story either. She maintained her innocence until her death, citing that the words just stemmed from deep within her.¹⁹

Following the incident, she was afraid to write again, even letters home to her mother, afraid that the words would not be her own. It was not until she traveled to the World’s Fair in the summer of 1893 that she learned much of the outside world. By

¹⁸ Ibid., 65.

¹⁹ Herrmann, 85.

learning through exhibits, her vocabulary grew and her mind turned from stories of fairies to stories of the real world. She became interested in the history and languages, showing her genius early in life by being able to read books on different subject and in different languages.

Yet another important subject of Keller's writing came from the subject of religion. She frequently wrote that God's love helped her overcome her handicaps. Just like in the Bible, "One thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see." Her book, *My Religion*, is a tribute to Emanuel Swedenborg, a Swedish man who emerged in the eighteenth century as a religious genius.²⁰ Swedenborgianism is the name given to the religious following of his philosophy. After an experience with God in 1744, Swedenborg believed that the Almighty wanted him to explain the spiritual sense of the scripture. In a state of wakefulness, he believed that he conversed with the angels and spirits. They told him that God was paramount above all things, God and science were connected, that there were three Heavens, that societies in Heaven reflect humankind, Heaven is filled with both rich and poor, and that there was an equilibrium between Heaven and Hell.²¹ Swedenborg found that the Bible and scripture were an ancient narrative that told of forgotten parables of a man's soul. Helen Keller relished in the joy of Swedenborg's writings because she found love and wisdom within the text. "I was glad to discover that the City of God was not a stupid affair of glass streets and sapphire walls, but a systematic treasury of wise, helpful thoughts and noble influences."²² Heaven was

²⁰ Helen Keller, *My Religion* (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, Inc.), 19-25. Swedenborg was born in Sweden in 1688 and was raised during a time that saw a country divided between Protestantism and philosophical works of Rousseau and Diderot. He received a doctorate in philosophy and became quite popular with his ideas on ethics. However, he turned away from fame and fortune and spent the majority of his life in poverty whilst helping others. He did not have his first contact with the spirit world until the age of fifty-six.

²¹ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and its Wonders and Hell* (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1969), 29-40, 421-431.

²² Helen Keller, *My Religion* (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1970), 48.

therefore a practical and livable world, one that did not shut out those who were blind and deaf, and did not judge those who were destitute.

Through the teachings of Swedenborgianism, Keller found a mystic world that she was able to live in, one that she could see and find comfort in, and her attitude changed and she gained a higher tolerance for the world around her. Immured by her darkness and silence, she found a light that would influence how she would treat her fellow man and how she was to live her life. Cut off from vision and sound, her perceptions became acute. She understood living life on the spiritual plane, as depicted in Swedenborg's vision of good and evil spirits. One may argue that her mind had not been tampered by the outside world of sight and sound, and her faith remained uncorrupted for her entire life.

As the teachings of Swedenborg influenced her life, there was yet another ideology that Keller embraced with enthusiasm: socialism. Anne Sullivan was the first person to introduce socialist literature into Helen Keller's life. Sullivan was not a Socialist, but thought that H.G. Wells's *New World for Old* and Karl Marx's philosophy would be stimulating enough to interest Helen. Keller herself credits becoming a Socialist by reading such works.²³ She stated "I am a socialist because I believe socialism will solve the misery of the world ... and give to the little children the right to be free."²⁴ After her self-professed Socialist views, the newspapers went crazy after Helen addressed that followed such views. Headlines read, "SCHENECTADY REDS ARE ADVERTISING; USING HELEN KELLER, THE BLIND GIRL, TO RECEIVE PUBLICITY." Keller addressed this situation in her 1912, writing *Why I Became a Socialist*, in complete disregard of her critics:

²³ Helen Keller, 2002. "How I Became a Socialist." *Monthly Review: An Independent Socialist Magazine* 54, no. 4: 45. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 28, 2010).

²⁴ Helen Keller, "Brutal Treatment of the Unemployed," *Sacramento Star* (March 16, 1914).

I am no worshiper of cloth of any color, but I love the red flag and what it symbolizes to me and other Socialists. I have a red flag hanging in my study, and if I could I should gladly march with it past the office of the Times and let all the reporters and photographers make the most of the spectacle.²⁵

Keller did not shy from vocalizing her opinions not only about being a Socialist, but the socialist party itself. A frequent letter writer, Keller would address editors and publications of socialist-themed papers, stating whether or not she would agree with them on certain topics. She feared that Socialists fighting among themselves provided to productivity. Instead, she argued that all should be unified and not like their capitalist counterparts that she detested so greatly. She referred to this unity as the “Cooperative Commonwealth,” that believed all are friends who labor for social revolution.²⁶

Helen began her political career by traveling to major American cities, touring sweatshops, factories, and slums. There, she found her distaste for what capitalism had done to American citizens. She found that American society was based solely on “individualism, conquest, and exploitation, with a total disregard of the good of the whole.”²⁷ She believed that trade and materials were the only objects thought to be pursued. Keller claimed that man would soon wake up and find the error of his ways within the social, political, and economical structure of the system in which he was a part of.

Keller was also a large supporter of woman suffrage. As a member of the National Women’s Party, she believed that rights were things that people were strong enough to claim. She made several arguments in numerous publications as to why women deserved the right to vote. She debated that women have the right to protect themselves

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Helen Keller, “A Call For Harmony,” *The New York Call* (January 4, 1913).

²⁷ Helen Keller, “New Vision for the Blind,” (October 25, 1913).

<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/index.htm>

under the law which would relieve man of reserving the right to protect women.²⁸

Economic urgencies also drove women to demand their rights. Female workers deserved protection under laws for rights within offices and factories.²⁹ And lastly, those women are more thoughtful when it comes to making decisions. Keller believed that men were quick to go to war, but a woman's vote would balance these violent thoughts. "Women know the cost of human life in terms of suffering and sacrifice as men can never know it. They will teach children to honor the heroes of peace above the heroes of war," Keller wrote.³⁰ Her argument claims that women were more concerned with the country as a whole; therefore women should be more active in attaining their rights by organizing.

Much of her views stemmed from her anti-war sentiments. The country was growing ever increasingly paranoid of war, World War I was in view, and people began to panic. During one of Keller's speaking tours, she addressed this idea in a labor forum: "The only moral virtue of war is that it compels the capitalist system to look itself in the face and admit it is a fraud."³¹ Keller believed that capitalists were only interested in protecting their assets that resided outside of their country. If their assets were threatened, they were willing to go to war for it.³² She was well-read on magazines and papers from England, France, Germany, and Austria concerning the war. She wound up rallying for the workers of America to reject the war and refuse to fight. Instead of calling for

²⁸ Helen Keller, "Why Men Need Woman Suffrage," *The New York Call* (October 17, 1913).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Helen Keller, "Menace to the Militarist Program: Speech at the Labor Forum, Washington Irving High School on December 19, 1915." <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/index.htm>. This paranoia stems from officials such as Congressman Gardner who told the public that Germany and Japan were planning on attacking the United States.

³² Ibid. Keller cites J.P. Morgan & Co. for supporting capitalists by investing their money in shrapnel plants.

violence, she pleaded with the workers of the country to rebel against being the obedient slave worker, reject child labor, and call for clean streets.³³

These working sentiments were woven collectively in another passion of Keller's which was the Industrial Workers of the World, also known as the IWW or the Wobblies:

The Industrial Workers of the World is a labor union based on class struggle. It admits only wage-earners, and acts on the principle of industrial unionism. Its battleground is the field industry. The visible expression of the battle is the strike, the lock-out, the clash between employer and employed. It is a moment of revolt against the ignorance, the poverty, the cruelty that too many accept in blind content.³⁴

The IWW was founded in 1905 over a labor struggle and claimed nation-wide attention during a strike in 1909. Helen, who faced the handicap lifestyle, became very sympathetic towards workers with needs. Her dream shifted to help fight for these changes. She joined the IWW because the socialist party was sinking from its revolutionary roots and began to focus more on gaining office under the current government. As the IWW was for the working class peoples, capitalist individuals became defensive and began to retaliate by persecuting, beating, and murdering members of the organization. Called "the scum of the Earth" and "dangerous," IWWs were sometimes arrested without warrants, never given accesses to attorneys, and denied bail. In some extreme cases, as in the August 1, 1917 incident in Butte, Montana, where a

³³ Helen Keller, "Strike Against War: Speech at Carnegie Hall, New York City on January 5, 1916." <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/index.htm>

³⁴ Helen Keller, "What is the IWW?: Speech at the New York City Civic Club on January 1918." <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/index.htm>. Keller would cite the Lawrence Strike being the major influence for her in joining the IWW.

cripple by the name of Frank Little who was on the executive board of the IWW was attacked in his home, dragged behind an car, and then hanged on a railroad trestle.³⁵

Helen's advocacy did not end with the IWW. Concerned with making her readers understand about afflictions and become knowledgeable that some may be prevented such as blindness which was not known to the general public which still believed that taboo acts (like sex) could affect someone's blindness. She advocated a medical procedure that included an injection of nitrate solution into the eye. "The way to help the blind or any other defective class is to understand, correct, remove the incapacities and inequalities of our entire civilization," Keller wrote.³⁶

Helen's outspoken ideas had landed her in hot water among critics, politicians, and government officials. The Nazi party found her work in *Out of the Dark* to be subversive and persuasive.³⁷ J. Edgar Hoover became quite paranoid of the influence of this left wing extremist and thought her to be dangerous. Dangerous enough Hoover sought to investigate her, leading to a very large FBI file on her.³⁸ Perhaps it was because she followed the teachings of Lenin and supported the Russian Revolution and compared the IWW to the Bolsheviks.

LATER LIFE

As Helen Keller's political life never drew to a close even in her later years, she continued to travel the globe, speaking on interests of the rights of freedom and the

³⁵ Helen Keller, "In Behalf of the IWW," *The Liberator* (March 1918).

<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/index.htm>. Some instances of violence are also seen in a public flogging of 17 men in Tulsa and the deportation of 1,200 miners from Brisbee.

³⁶ Helen Keller, *Out of the Dark: Essays, Letters, and Addresses on Physical and Social Vision* (Garden City: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1913), 39.

³⁷ J.C. Quicke, "'Speaking Out': the political career of Helen Keller," *Disability, Handicap & Society* 3 (1988): 168.

³⁸ "Helen Keller." Federal Bureau of Investigation: Freedom of Information and Privacy Arts Section.

handicap. Internal problems had spawned from the split in the Socialist party and the downfall of the IWW after years of being persecuted, attacked, and pursued by the government. An internal schism of the IWW split many members in the organization and externally left the group less powerful than it was. Keller therefore lost some of her connections to the working public because of this.³⁹

Despite this fallout, Keller never came to a halt in working for the development of handicap people. She took part in developmental research with a doctor, Frederick Tilney, a neurology professor at Columbia University that discovered that an average normal person has developed their brain by twenty percent. Keller played a significant role in the study by allowing Dr. Tilney to test her brain receptors on detecting odors, temperature, and other surroundings.⁴⁰ Tilney concluded that a person with such handicap has the same developed brain as an average person. The only difference was her use of the senses by development in the brain through ordinary education.⁴¹ Keller continued to raise money for the American Foundation of the Blind, and became employed by the organization.

Keller was honored with numerous awards such as the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the National Women's Hall of Fame. Starting in 1961, she began to suffer from a series of strokes and passed away on June 1, 1968 in her sleep in Westport, Connecticut. Her ashes are laid to rest with her companions, Anne Sullivan and Polly Thompson in Washington, D.C.

CURRENT PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

³⁹ Paul Frederick Brissenden, *The I.W.W.: A Study in American Syndicalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1920), 253.

⁴⁰ Emily C. Davis, "Helen Keller Shows Future of Brain." *The Science News-Letter* (1928), 441.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 147.

With all of the accomplishments that Keller achieved, it can be difficult to understand why the modern perception of her has changed. The most obvious influence over the public perception of Keller is the 1962 Arthur Penn film, *The Miracle Worker*. Anne Bancroft plays Anne Sullivan and Patty Duke is Helen Keller. The film is the essential link to how the public understands Keller and her life. Forever frozen in time, Keller is immortalized as a spoiled child who in a life of darkness and silence is brought into the light by a tutor who is slightly blind herself. At a water pump, Anne Sullivan breaks through to Keller so that she understands words. The movie ends with Keller stating, “Wah-wah.” The movie is at times melodramatic for a Hollywood-audience setting, but inspirational. It does, however, explain the importance of Keller overcoming her disabled obstacles and why the majority of people only remember her as a child. Her life after the event has been forgotten. As it is played to school children for educational purposes, the imagery sets in the minds of youth and sticks with them as they grow older. For this reason, some view Keller as an inspirational figure who overcame impossible obstacles and is respected for this.

Folklore has become another expression that the current public mindset has turned towards in the past thirty years, that inhibits people to discuss taboo subjects that are avoided in a politically correct reality. In an observation during the winter of 1979-1980, students and teachers in central Pennsylvania were asking each other questions such as “How did Helen Keller burn her fingers? Expecting answers such as “Reading a waffle iron.” The Helen Keller joke is the latest to jostle sensibilities that are pertinent to social problems. This adolescent humor is brought about by what children see on television.

Television events found its presence in modern day folklore in the middle of the twentieth century. After the Civil Rights Act of 1964, news shows broadcasted stories of

retaliation of the act that included the burning of school busses. Following the event, a popular wave of “dead bus” jokes ensued. Such as, “What is black and yellow and squeals when you turn it over? A school bus.”⁴² Or from the famous actor, Danny Kay, who asked “What has four wheels and lies on its back? A dead bus.”⁴³

Following the release of Arthur Penn’s 1962 film, jokes began to circulate of Helen Keller. Jokes did not begin to fully outpour until October 14, 1979, when NBC premiered William Gibson’s “The Miracle Worker.” During this release, the Handicapped Children Act, Public Law 94-142 was passed. This law integrated handicapped children into the public school system. This act mainstreamed the news on television stations which covered stories on how public buildings would have to adapt to being handicap accessible, much to the dismay of townspeople’s budgets or how the government implemented laws that allowed the handicapped to hold jobs in public places. The socioeconomic sectors were changed by this integration. Therefore, the youth turned these news stories into folkloric form. This contributed to the sick-joke style upon another human being. Students grabbed hold of Helen Keller’s story because she was a recognizable face to their disability-themed humor. Keller, who faced challenges from multiple disabilities, became their perfect subject, and was made fun of for her sightlessness and deafness. “Did you see Helen Keller’s new house in Philadelphia? Neither did she.”⁴⁴ And “What did Helen Keller do when she fell down a well? She yelled until ‘til her hands turned blue.”⁴⁵

These jokes deal with sick and distasteful humor about deaf-mutes as some illogically deal with Helen herself. Researcher Mac E. Barrick disturbingly argues that

⁴² Mac E. Barrick, “The Helen Keller Joke Cycle.” *The Journal of American Folklore* 93, no. 370 (1980), 442. Barrick took observational data from schools in Pennsylvania. Joke taken from *Time Magazine*, May 29, 1964, p. 51.

⁴³ Ibid. Joke taken from an interview with Danny Kaye on CBS-TV. April 14, 1965.

⁴⁴ Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin, 42. (1976).

⁴⁵ Larry Wilde, *Larry Wilde’s Official Book of Sick Jokes* (New York: Bantam, 1979), 88.

the jokes have a cathartic effect that erases pity for the disabled so that both the jokester and the listener are on the same terms. Not the dissimilar from the Arabic proverb, “If thou seest a blind man beat him; thou art not better than God.”⁴⁶ One finds this incredibly unnerving.

Physical disability as a joking matter has become apparent because people have comes to terms with such ideas. Even Saturday Night Live has aired skits in which a couple lovingly makes fun of one another saying, “You’re so retarded!” and then they proceed to kiss. Then, there was the 2008-09 radio hit 3OH!3 song, “Don’t Trust Me.” The song states, “Shush girl, shut your lips/Do the Helen Keller and talk with your hips/Don’t trust a ho/Never trust a ho/Won’t trust a ho/’Cause a ho won’t trust me.”⁴⁷ This song is completely derogatory to those with disabilities as well as sexist tendency by stating that women need to be silent and only be around for the pleasure of men. It presents the listener with a modern interpretation on the current perceptions of Helen Keller.

CLOSING REMARKS

The life of Helen Keller was not filled with the silence and darkness that handicapped her. She refused to let those ailments envelop her. Instead, she used sheer intellect and a strong belief system that once appealed to the masses. Deeply rooted in the beliefs that all people deserve equal treatment and equal rights, Keller dedicated a selfless life to those who needed aid. It is quite sad that for someone who once was a powerful adversary in the working community, as well as the socialist party, her politically active life has been forgotten. Schools, unions, and social organizations would not have been created if she had not set forth to make them. For those who refrain from ignorance by

⁴⁶ A.P. Singer, *Arabic Proverbs* (Cairo: Deimer, 1913), 42-43.

⁴⁷ 3OH3!, *Don’t Trust Me*, Photo Finish 2008-CD, Want.

looking past distasteful jokes or melodramatic films, one can see how important this individual was to social movements. Sadly, history is remembered by those who remain powerful. Governmental bureaucrats that found themselves threatened by the socialist revolutionary wing sought to make Keller, as well as other revolutionary figures, fade into the background of society. Ironically, the Industrial Workers of the World began to collapse after they were prosecuted by said bureaucrats. With the government reeling from extreme paranoia of socialism and the fall of the IWW, Keller lost her connections that allowed her to be vocal in the social sphere. Her advocacy has never truly been forgotten, her story is still as inspiring and powerful as it was when *Deliverance* was released. Still, Helen Keller, like so many women before her, have only been remembered for specific accomplishments in her life, ones that the government and education system find appropriate.