

Homework Reading (Pre-Reading)

Pre-Reading Assignment: As you read, annotate the text, and think about why elementary schools study Helen Keller. What about her life is relevant to our understanding of American History? What do you think are the important details to know about the life of Helen Keller based on this reading? Why do you think her legacy has lived on in American history?

Context: www.ducksters.com is a website to provide biographies about children for grades 3-8. This is a biography of Helen Keller given to children.

- **Occupation:** Activist
- **Born:** June 27, 1880 in Tuscumbia, Alabama
- **Died:** June 1, 1968 in Arcan Ridge, Easton, Connecticut
- **Best known for:** Accomplishing much despite being both deaf and blind

Where did Helen Keller grow up?

Helen Keller was born on June 27, 1880 in Tuscumbia, Alabama. She was a happy healthy baby. Her father, Arthur, worked for a newspaper while her mother, Kate, took care of the home and baby Helen. She grew up on her family's large farm called Ivy Green. She enjoyed the animals including the horses, dogs, and chickens.

Illness

When Helen was around one and a half years old she became very sick. She had a high fever and a bad headache for several days. Although Helen survived, her parents soon realized that she had lost both her sight and her hearing.

Frustration

Helen tried to communicate with the people around her. She had special motions she would use to indicate that she wanted her mom or her dad. However, she would also get frustrated. She realized that she was different and it was extremely difficult to let others know what she needed. She would sometimes throw tantrums, kicking and hitting other people in anger.

Annie Sullivan

Soon Helen's parents realized that she needed some special help. They contacted the Perkins Institute for the Blind in Boston. The director suggested a former student named Annie Sullivan. Annie had been blind, but had her eyesight restored by surgery. Perhaps her unique experience would allow her to help Helen. Annie came to work with Helen on March 3, 1887 and would be her helper and companion for the next 50 years.

Learning Words

Annie began to teach Helen words. She would press the letters of words in to Helen's hand. For example, she would put a doll in one of Helen's hands and then press the letters of the word D-O-L-L into the other hand. She taught Helen a number of words. Helen would repeat the words into Annie's hand.

However, Helen still didn't understand that the hand signs had meaning. Then one day Annie put Helen's hand into water coming from a pump. Then she spelled out water into Helen's other hand. Something clicked. Helen finally understood what Annie was doing. An entire new world opened up for Helen. She learned a number of new words that day. In many ways it was one of the happiest days of her life.

Learning to Read

Next Annie taught Helen how to read. Helen must have been very bright and Annie an amazing teacher, because soon Helen could read entire books in Braille. Braille is a special reading system where the letters are made out of little bumps on a page.

Imagine trying to learn how to read if you couldn't see or hear. It's truly amazing what Helen and Annie were able to accomplish. At the age of ten Helen could read and use a typewriter. Now she wanted to learn how to talk.

Learning to Talk

Helen Keller learned how to talk from Sarah Fuller. Sarah was a teacher for the deaf. By resting her hand on Sarah's lips, Helen learned how to feel sound vibrations and how the lips moved to make sounds. She started off learning a few letters and sounds. Then she advanced to words and, finally, sentences. Helen was so happy that she could say words.

School

At sixteen years old Helen attended Radcliffe College for women in Massachusetts. Annie attended school with her and helped to sign the lectures into Helen's hand. Helen graduated from Radcliffe in 1904 with honors.

Writing

During college Helen began to write about her experiences being deaf and blind. She first wrote a number of articles for a magazine called the *Ladies' Home Journal*. These articles were later published together in a book called *The Story of My Life*. A few years later, in 1908, she published another book called *The World I Live In*.

Working for Others

As Helen grew older she wanted to help other people like herself. She wanted to inspire them and give them hope. She joined the American Foundation for the Blind and traveled the country giving speeches and raising money for the foundation. Later, during World War II, she visited with wounded army soldiers encouraging them not to give up. Helen spent much of her life working to raise money and awareness for people with disabilities, especially the deaf and the blind.

Interesting Facts about Helen Keller

- Annie Sullivan was often called the "Miracle Worker" for the way she was able to help Helen.
- Helen became very famous. She met with every President of the United States from Grover Cleveland to Lyndon Johnson. That's a lot of presidents!
- Helen starred in a movie about herself called *Deliverance*. Critics liked the movie, but not a lot of people went to see it.
- She loved dogs. They were a great source of joy to her.
- Helen became friends with famous people such as the inventor of the telephone Alexander Graham Bell and the author Mark Twain.
- She wrote a book titled *Teacher* about Annie Sullivan's life.
- Two films about Helen Keller won Academy Awards. One was a documentary called *The Unconquered* (1954) and the other was a drama called *The Miracle Worker* (1962) starring Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke.

Source: https://www.ducksters.com/biography/women_leaders/helen_keller.php

Document A (Letter to Eugene Debs) (Excerpted)

Historical Context: Helen Keller is writing to labor leader and Socialist Eugene Debs. The Supreme Court in Debs v. United States upheld Debs' conviction under the Espionage Act. The Espionage Act and the Sedition Act were passed during World War I to curtail free speech and promote national unity. In this letter, Keller expresses her views on the work of Debs, the Supreme Court, and World War I.

Of course, the Supreme Court has sustained the decision of the lower court in your case. To my mind, the decision has added another laurel to your wreath of victories. Once more you are going to prison for upholding the liberties of the people.

I write because my heart cries out, and will not be still. I write because I want you to know that I should be proud if the Supreme Court convicted me of abhorring war, and doing all in my power to oppose it. When I think of the millions who have suffered in all the wicked wars of the past, I am shaken with the anguish of a great impatience. I want to fling myself against all brute powers that destroy life and break the spirit of man.

In the persecution of our comrades there is one satisfaction. Every trial of men like you, every sentence against them, tears away the veil that hides the face of the enemy. The discussion and agitation that follows the trials define more sharply the positions that must be taken before all men can live together in peace, happiness and security.

We were driven into the war for liberty, democracy and humanity. Behold what is happening all over the world today! Oh, where is the swift vengeance of Jehovah, that it does not fall upon the hosts of those who are marshalling machine guns against hunger-stricken people? It is the complacency of madness to call such acts "preserving law and order." Law and order! What oceans of blood and tears are shed in their name! I have come to loathe traditions and institutions that take away the rights of the poor and protect the wicked against judgment.

The wise fools who sit in the high places of justice fail to see that, in revolutionary times like the present, vital issues are settled, not by statutes, decrees and authorities, but in spite...

You dear comrade! I have long loved you because you are an apostle of brotherhood and freedom. For years I have thought of you as a dauntless explorer going towards the dawn and, like a humble adventurer, I have followed in the trail of your footsteps. From time to time the greetings that have come back to me from you have made me very happy, and now I reach out my hand and clasp yours through prison bars.

With heartfelt greetings, and with a firm faith that the cause for which you are now martyred shall be all the stronger because of your sacrifice and devotion, I am,

Yours for the revolution--may it come swiftly, like a shaft sundering the dark!

Helen Keller

Source: Helen Keller, Letter to Eugene Debs, New York Call, April 29, 1919

Guiding Questions for Source

1. Describe Keller's relationship with Debs. How does she feel about him? How do you know what you know?
2. How does Keller feel about the Supreme Court decision? What evidence do you see to back this up?
3. What does Keller mean by "sweet vengeance of Jehovah?" What does she foresee happening because of the Supreme Court and WWI?

Document B (Public Speech by Helen Keller) (Excerpted)

Historical Context: Helen Keller is delivering a speech at Carnegie surrounding US History into World War I. This speech touches not only on the war, but notions of class, industrialization, and imperialism in the modern world.

The future of the world rests in the hands of America. The future of America rests on the backs of 80,000,000 working men and women and their children. We are facing a grave crisis in our national life. The few who profit from the labor of the masses want to organize the workers into an army which will protect the interests of the capitalists. You are urged to add to the heavy burdens you already bear the burden of a larger army and many additional warships. It is in your power to refuse to carry the artillery and the dread-noughts and to shake off some of the burdens, too, such as limousines, steam yachts and country estates. You do not need to make a great noise about it. With the silence and dignity of creators you can end wars and the system of selfishness and exploitation that causes wars. All you need to do to bring about this stupendous revolution is to straighten up and fold your arms...

Congress is not preparing to defend the people of the United States. It is planning to protect the capital of American speculators and investors in Mexico, South America, China, and the Philippine Islands. Incidentally this preparation will benefit the manufacturers of munitions and war machines.

Every modern war has had its root in exploitation. The Civil War was fought to decide whether to slaveholders of the South or the capitalists of the North should exploit the West. The Spanish-American War decided that the United States should exploit Cuba and the Philippines. The South African War decided that the British should exploit the diamond mines. The Russo-Japanese War decided that Japan should exploit Korea. The present war is to decide who shall exploit the Balkans, Turkey, Persia, Egypt, India, China, Africa. And we are whetting our sword to scare the victors into sharing the spoils with us. Now, the workers are not interested in the spoils; they will not get any of them anyway.

The preparedness propagandists have still another object, and a very important one. They want to give the people something to think about besides their won unhappy condition. They know the cost of living is high, wages are low, employment is uncertain and will be much more so when the European call for munitions stops. No matter how hard and incessantly the people work, they often cannot afford the comforts of life; many cannot obtain the necessities.

Will the workers walk into this trap? Will they be fooled again? I am afraid so. The people have always been amenable to oratory of this sort. The workers know they have no enemies except their masters. They know that their citizenship papers are no warrant for the safety of themselves or their wives and children. They know that honest sweat, persistent toil and years of struggle bring them nothing worth holding on to, worth fighting for. Yet, deep down in their foolish hearts they believe they have a country. Oh blind vanity of slaves!

...What a price to pay for an abstraction--the lives of millions of young men; other millions crippled and blinded for life; existence made hideous for still more millions of human being; the achievement and inheritance of generations swept away in a moment--and nobody better off for all the misery! This terrible sacrifice would be comprehensible if the thing you die for and call country fed, clothed, housed and warmed you, educated and cherished your children. I think the workers are the most unselfish of the children of men; they toil and live and die for other people's country, other people's sentiments, other people's liberties and other people's happiness! The workers have no liberties of their own; they are not free when they are compelled to work twelve or ten or eight hours a day. they are not free when they are ill paid for their exhausting toil. They are not free when their children must labor in mines, mills and factories or starve, and when their women may be driven by poverty to lives of shame. They are not free when they are clubbed and imprisoned because they go on strike for a raise of wages and for the elemental justice that is their right as human beings.

We are not free unless the men who frame and execute the laws represent the interests of the lives of the people and no other interest. The ballot does not make a free man out of a wage slave. There has never existed a truly free and democratic nation in the world. From time immemorial men have followed with blind loyalty the strong men who had the power of money and of armies. Even while battlefields were piled high with their own dead they have tilled the lands of the rulers and have been robbed of the fruits of their labor. They have built palaces and pyramids, temples and cathedrals that held no real shrine of liberty.

As civilization has grown more complex the workers have become more and more enslaved, until today they are little more than parts of the machines they operate. Daily they face the dangers of railroad, bridge, skyscraper, freight train, stockyard, lumber raft and mine. Panting and training at the docks, on the railroads and underground and on the seas, they move the traffic and pass from land to land the precious commodities that make it possible for us to live. And what is their reward? A scanty wage, often poverty, rents, taxes, tributes and war indemnities.

Strike against all ordinances and laws and institutions that continue the slaughter of peace and the butcheries of war. Strike against war, for without you no battles can be fought. Strike against manufacturing scrapnel and gas bombs and all other tools of murder. Strike against preparedness that means death and misery to millions of human being. Be not dumb, obedient slaves in an army of destruction. Be heroes in an army of construction.

Source: Helen Keller, Speech at Carnegie Hall, New York City, January 5, 1916

Guiding Questions for Source

1. How does Keller feel about American entry into World War I? How do you know?
2. What connection does Keller see between capitalism, war, and economic class?
3. How do you think Keller would define freedom? In what ways, if any, is the laboring class free?

Document C (An Interview with Helen Keller)

Historical Context: This piece was published in the New York Tribune in 1916. Helen Keller discusses her life, grassroots activism, and evolving perspective on the world. In the interview, Keller mentions the International Workers of the World (IWW). The IWW was an international labor union which was considered one of the most radical, with ties to socialism and anarchism.

I asked that Miss Keller relate the steps by which she turned into the uncompromising radical who now faces the world as Helen Keller, not the sweet sentimentalist of woman's magazine days.

"I was religious to start with," she began in enthusiastic acquiescence to my request. "I had thought blindness a misfortune."

"Then I was appointed on a commission to investigate the conditions among the blind. For the first time I, who had thought blindness a misfortune beyond human control, found that too much of it was traceable to wrong industrial conditions, often caused by the selfishness and greed of employers. And the social evil contributed its share. I found that poverty drove women to the life of shame that ended in blindness. "Then I read H.G. Wells' *Old Worlds for New*, summaries of Karl Marx's philosophy and his manifestoes. It seemed as if I had been asleep and waked to a new world--a world so different from the beautiful world I had lived in.

"For a time I was depressed"--her voice saddened in reminiscence--"but little by little my confidence came back and I realized that the wonder is not that conditions are so bad, but that humanity has advanced so far in spite of them. And now I am in the fight to change things. I may be a dreamer, but dreamers are necessary to make facts!" her voice almost shrilled in its triumph, and her hand found and clutched my knee in vibrant emphasis.

"And you feel happier than in the beautiful make-believe world you had dreamed?" I questioned.

"Yes," she answered with firm finality in the voice which stumbles a little. "Reality even when it is sad is better than illusions." (This from a woman whom it would seem all earthy things are but that.) "Illusions are at ten mercy of any winds that blow. Real happiness much some from within, from a fixed purpose and faith in one's fellow men--and of that I have more than I ever had."

"And all this had to come after you left college? Did you get none of this knowledge of life at college?"

"No!"--an emphatic, triumphant, almost terrifying denial--"college isn't the place to go for any ideas."

"I thought I was going to college to be educated," she resumed as she composed herself, and laughing more lightly, "I am an example of the education dealt out to present generations. It's a deadlock. Schools seem to love the dead past and live in it."

"But you know, don't you," I pleaded through Mrs. Macy and for her, "that the intentions of your teachers were of the best."

"But they amounted to nothing," she countered. "They did not teach me about things as they are today, or about the vital problems of the people. They taught me Greek drama and Roman history, the celebrated achievements of war rather than those of the heroes of peace. For instance, there were a dozen chapters on war where there were a few paragraphs about the inventors, and it is this overemphasis of the cruelties of life that breeds the wrong ideal. Education taught me that it was a finer thing to be a Napoleon than to create a new potato.

"It is my nature to fight as soon as I see wrongs to be made right. So after I read Wells and Marx and learned what I did, I joined a Socialist branch. I made up my mind to do something. And the best thing seemed to join a fighting party and help their propaganda. That was four years ago. I have been an industrialist since."

"An industrialist?" I asked, surprised out of composure. "You don't mean an IWW--a syndicalist?"

"I became an IWW because I found out that the Socialist party was too slow. It is sinking in the political bog. It is almost, if not quite, impossible for the party to keep its revolutionary character so long as it occupies a place under the government and seeks office under it. The government does not stand for interests the Socialist party is supposed to represent."

Socialism, however, is a step in the right direction, she conceded to her dissenting hearers

"The true task is to unite and organize all workers on an economic basis, and it is the workers themselves who must secure freedom for themselves, who must grow strong." Miss Keller continued. "Nothing can be gained by political action. That is why I became an IWW."

"What particular incident led you to become an IWW?" I interrupted

"The Lawrence Strike. Why? Because I discovered that the true idea of the IWW is not only to better conditions, to get them for all people, but to get them at once."

"What are you committed to--education or revolution?"

"Revolution." She answered decisively. "We can't have education without revolution. We have tried peace education for 1,900 years and it has failed. Let us try revolution and see what it will do now."

"I am not for peace at all hazards. I regret this war, but I have never regretted the blood of the thousands spilled during the French Revolution. And the workers are learning how to stand alone. They are learning a lesson they will apply to their own good out in the trenches. Generals testify to the splendid initiative the workers in the trenches take. If they can do that for their masters you can be sure they will do that for themselves when they have taken matters into their own hands.

"And don't forget workers are getting their discipline in the trenches," Miss Keller continued. "They are acquiring the will to combat. "My cause will emerge from the trenches stronger than it ever was. Under the obvious battle waging there, there is an invisible battle for the freedom of man."

Again the advisability of printing all this here set forth. And this finally from the patience-exhausted, gentle little woman: "I don't give a damn about semi-radicals!"

Gradually, through the talk, Helen Keller's whole being had taken on a glow, and it was in keeping with the exalted look on her face and the glory in her sightless blue eyes that she told me:

"I feel like Joan of Arc at times. My whole becomes uplifted. I, too, hear the voices that say 'Come,' and I will follow, no matter what the cost, no matter what the trials I am placed under. Jail, poverty, calumny--they matter not. Truly He has said, 'Woe unto you that permits the least of mine to suffer.'"

Source: An interview written by Barbara Bindley published in the New York Tribune, January 16, 1916.

Guiding Questions for Source

1. In what ways does Keller connect her disabilities to the world around her?
2. What critiques does Keller offer of her own education? How did her thinking evolve over time?
3. Why do you think Keller refers to her self as a Joan of Arc? Be sure to point to specific evidence!

Document D (A Speech for Suffrage)

Historical Context: Helen Keller delivers a speech in New York State advocating for Women's Suffrage in New York State in 1918. Suffrage means the right to vote. New York State passed women's suffrage in 1918 and women obtained the right to vote nationally in 1920.

“An organization of women recently wanted to obtain welfare measure from a legislature of New York. They took a petition signed by five thousand women to the chairman of the committee that was to report on the measure. He said it was a good bill, and ought to pass. But nothing was heard of it. After the women had waited a reasonable time, they sent up a request to know what had become of the bill. The chairman said he did not remember anything about it. He was reminded that the bill had been brought to him signed by five thousand women. "O," replied the chairman, "a bill signed by five thousand women is not worth the paper it is written on. Get five men to sign, and we'll do something about it." That is one reason we demand the vote-- we want five thousand women to count for more than five men.

The majority of women who need the vote are wage-earners. A tremendous change has taken place in the industrial world since power machines have taken the place of hand-tools. Both men and women have been compelled to adjust themselves to a new system of production and distribution. Under the machine system the labor of both men and women is exploited as never before. In the terrific struggle for existence which has resulted from this change women and children suffer even more than men. Indeed, economic pressure drives many women to market their sex. Yet they may have nothing to say about the conditions under which they live and toil. Helpless, unheeded they must endure hardships that lead to misery and degradation. They may not lift a hand to defend themselves against cruel, crippling processes that bring on early death or premature old age, processes that stunt the body and brain! Are the political and industrial needs of women less genuine than those of men? Let us put an end to this stupid, one-sided, one-power arrangement and have suffrage for all-- an inclusive suffrage that takes in everybody. After all, the aim of every good man and woman is justice..."

Source: Helen Keller's speech advocating for women's suffrage, 1918, New York State.

Guiding Questions for Source

1. In what ways does Keller see a connection between the fight for suffrage and economic class?
2. What is your reaction to the story about the petition in New York State?
3. How might suffrage for all change society in the mind of Keller?

Document E (Birth Control and Emma Goldman) (Excerpted)

Historical Context: Helen Keller is writing an editorial to the New York Call in 1916 to protest the arrest of Emma Goldman for teaching effective birth control methods. Emma Goldman was an anarchist political activist and writer.

“The arrest of Emma Goldman for teaching effective methods of birth control seems to me to have raised the only important issue in the whole fight for family limitation...Emma Goldman's case will settle the fundamental question whether we are to be free to spread knowledge that will make the agitation for birth control bring results in the tenement districts.

Many mothers already desire to limit the number of offspring. They live among families so large and so poor that hunger forces them to send their young children to labor. Perhaps they have seen their own babes suffer for want of food, or their progeny is already so large that the fear of giving birth to another child is more terrible than the fear of death. They need information, not persuasion...

The attempt to imprison a woman who is teaching the mothers of the working class what they so pitifully need to know is an outrage. It should arouse every one that believes in free speech and in a woman's right to rule her own body. The manner in which Emma Goldman was arrested is a disgrace to the City of New York. The ruffianly search was an insult to her womanhood and to the common womanhood of all of us, --what did the police expect to find? A bomb? And the warrant against her rests on a perversion of the purpose of a statute.

...Moreover, the police do not enforce it against persons that make criminal sales. I venture the assertion that there is not a drug store in your state where one or more of the things Emma Goldman recommends as means of birth control cannot be openly purchased.

Women of the upper classes know about these contracepts and use them. The difference between the birth rates of Riverside Drive and the East Side proves this. Does anyone suppose that the infrequency of the stork's visits among them is caused by the superior moral restraint of the well-to-do? The attempt to keep the women of the working class under the subjection of ignorance is part of the conscious and diabolical purpose of the masters to prevent any falling off in the supply of wage slaves.

Emma Goldman is persecuted not because she preached a birth strike and told women how to make it effective, but because she preached to the working class. No one has hauled into court any of the members of the Woman's Peace Party who advocate a birth strike against war. The law is offended only when someone takes direct action against the frightfulness of the industrial conflict.

This is no mere fight to keep a woman out of prison; it is a battle for the freedom of all women. Anyone that refuses to take part because Goldman happens to be an anarchist, is guilty of treason to the cause of workers...

The important truth is, she has consecrated her life to the salvation of the oppressed. She is now engaged in a contest with the authorities of oppression. If we stand aside and allow her to be imprisoned, you and I will be imprisoned likewise if we try to prevent the propagation of the children of fear.

Very sincerely yours, Helen Keller

Source: Letter from Helen Keller to the Editor of the NY Call in opposition of Emma Goldman's arrest for teaching effective birth control methods, April 6, 1916.

Guiding Questions for Source

1. Why does Helen Keller defend Emma Goldman? What evidence do you have support this?
2. Why does Keller see access to information about birth control as a necessity?
3. How does Keller seek to explore issues of class in her defense of Emma Goldman?

Helen Keller's Worldview Graphic Organizer

Issue	What is Helen Keller's Position on The Issue?	What evidence do you have to back this up?
Document A: Freedom of Speech During Wartime and Eugene Debs		
Document B: U.S. Entry into World War I		
Document C: Labor Conflict		
Document D: Women's Suffrage		
Document E: Birth Control		

Synthesize! Based on this jigsaw activity, create a mission statement for Helen Keller. A mission statement is a guiding vision an individual or group creates to help provide clarity in their work.