

# Helen Keller: Reconsidering the Challenging Icon, Helen Keller: Reconsidering the Challenged Icon

Neelam Rath<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. Shailendra<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Research Scholar, CCSU, Meerut U.P., India

Email: neelamrathivikas@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor, M.M.D. College, Khekhra, Baghpat, U.P. India

**Abstract - Helen Keller, the small deaf-blind girl who defied huge odds, is still widely known more than thirty years after her death. Beyond this public image, though, is the true narrative of a genuine woman: a long-lived writer, socialist, suffragette, and radical activist who is always seen as a child by the public. This essay explores the development of Keller's enduring legendary position and popular image, examining their goals and contemporary consequences for persons with disabilities. Additionally, it reveals her life's real story and demonstrates the current problems she encountered. Lastly, it discusses the value of going over her life story again and its importance in promoting disability culture. I recall an assembly at my old school with the topic being "heroes throughout time."**

**With 150 other kids seated cross-legged in the large school hall, we prayed to God for Helen Keller to be brought out there, hoping and praying that we would have the same strength and courage to face life. Maybe we saw The Miracle Worker because, even now, 25 years later, I can't seem to get rid of a scene from the movie: the young Helen and her instructor, the dramatic scene by the water pump, the moment when Helen, who is blind and deaf, learns to speak and a "miracle" happens.**

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## INTRODUCTION

I also recall an innate reluctance to accept the information that we were being given. As a child without a disability, this person was outside of my life. She was out of my reach, a child who would soon be crippled. In any case, she was positioned as the ideal that I ought to aim for, even if I didn't want to, and would undoubtedly fall short of. As I became older, I was able to forget about her most of the time. But I would criticize her when people expected me to be inspired.

Later, as an adult, I read a book by Oldfield (1989) on female anti-militarists. I became aware of Simone Weil's articles, Christa Wolf's awakening to the Nazis in her early years in World War II Germany. Among them, I discovered that Helen Keller was quite different from the one, I knew in school but I was conveyed for the similarity in both. There was a real person, an author, activist, and suffragist in place of some pallid image. Years prior, I had been taught an image of Helen Keller rather than the real Helen Keller. I started reading more and more to analyze her own words to discover her true nature and to try to make sense of

the discrepancy between the truth and fiction of her life.

I feel compelled to share the reality of her life after learning what I have. But I also want to examine the inspirations behind and beginnings of its fiction. The reason I have remained focused is not just because of the events in her life; rather, it is because the concerns that shaped and defined them are still relevant to disability advocates today. Her life's connection to our past, the lessons we may draw from the past, and the knowledge that, if hesitantly, we are moving forward excite me. In this piece of writing, I'll: Discuss how her transformation from a regular person to an iconic figure came to be. Examine its intent and the ramifications it has for those of us with disabilities. Examine the concept of reinterpreting icons and integrating their narratives into a disability-friendly society. Bergmann states:

"Most people know of Helen Keller as a disabled seven-year-old in the grips of an oblivion of no sight, no sound, rescued by an incredible teacher at a well at the age of seven, brought out of that oblivion

through language ...and then it disappears from people's minds." (1999, 58)

## MAIN TEXT

Helen Keller was born as the eldest child of Cap. Arthur Keller and Kate, in 1880 in Tuscumbia, Alabama. The Keller family, once prosperous, had fallen into poverty after the Civil War. When she was a child of less than two years, she was attacked by an illness that snatched her power of listening and watching. The reaction of her family members was quite different to this incident: her uncle suggested institutionalizing her due to her perceived defects, while her aunt believed Helen had great potential and sought ways to communicate with her. Helen herself began creating basic signs to interact with her family.

To manage Helen's tantrums and find a way to educate her, the family sought the help of Alexander Graham Bell, known for his work with the deaf. Bell recommended contacting the Perkins School for the Blind in Boston, which led them to Anne Sullivan, a recent graduate. Anne traveled to Alabama to teach Helen, using the deaf-blind manual alphabet to spell words in her hand. Initially, Helen saw this as a game, but a breakthrough came at a water pump where she connected the feeling of water with the spelled word, marking her first understanding of language. This moment, detailed in Keller's autobiography, was a pivotal point in her life. This "miracle" would forever alter her perception as Herrmann confirms in his interview, "She was transformed from this semi-wild child into this saint-like child, this angel child. She was groomed to play a part." (1999, 2)

When Helen Keller discovered how to learn language and other subjects, she embraced them enthusiastically. She was exceptionally intelligent and learned rapidly. Her teacher, Anne Sullivan, sent a progress letter to the director of her school. It was the time when the children with special needs hardly survived, the news that Helen could be educated was groundbreaking. Anagnos publicized her story, and soon Helen became world-famous as the "miracle child."

Throughout her childhood, the public and press were intensely interested in her. Exaggerated stories of her abilities, such as identifying colors by touch and fluently speaking seven languages by age ten, circulated widely. Descriptions of her were lavish, depicting her as a genius and a natural wonder. Celebrities visited her, authors wrote about intellectuals, and scientists examined her mind and senses like normal children. Every detail of her life was avidly consumed by the public. Some eminent people helped her to get an Education and she started writing with a stylus. Despite her success, the emphasis on her means of communication has been questioned, particularly by the deaf community.

Her education coincided with the rise of a movement named oralism, which advocated teaching deaf

children by lip reading and way of speaking. Influenced by Alexander Graham Bell, a key proponent of oralism, Helen's family followed his advice without question. Lipreading and speech were presented as the primary modes of communication, relegating the manual alphabet to a secondary role and reinforcing her isolation from other deaf individuals. Her education continued along this oralist path, including her time at the Wright-Humason School, in New York.

From a young age, Helen aspired to improve social conditions, which required effective communication. Sign language, being primarily visual, was not easily accessible to her, and the manual alphabet made communication slow. Speaking was the most effective way she knew to convey her ideas. She worked tirelessly to speak clearly but often felt discouraged and exhausted. Ultimately, Helen was unable to speak clearly and consequently, the strangers could not understand her which was a lifelong regret and personal failure.

Helen had known since she was a little child that she intended to dedicate her life to advancing social justice. She has to be able to communicate clearly to do this. She did not have easy access to sign language, which is primarily a visual language rather than a tactile one, and communication was exceedingly slow due to the deaf-blind manual alphabet. It requires the proper spoken spelling of every word individually. Speaking was the most efficient way for Helen to share her ideas with others, as far as she was aware. Although she was happy with her accomplishment and "laboured night and day," "discouraging and weariness cast me down frequently" (Keller, 1903). Helen regretted her lifelong belief that she had failed since she was never able to communicate in a way that strangers could understand.

She completed her entry examinations from Radcliffe, the topmost institution for women at the time, at the age of eighteen. Radcliffe reluctantly accepted Helen.

When word spread, there was a lot of discussion—'Why don't they say outright that Miss Sullivan is entering Radcliffe instead of Helen Keller a blind, deaf, and dumb girl?' (Lash, 1980)

Seldom did any employees or pupils try to get in touch with her. Rarely were books offered in Braille, Annie had to tediously finger-write the syllabus, and Helen had to spend every night typing up the lectures she had learned that day. For fifty years, Helen was enrolled in the US as the only deaf as well as blind college student. Although her education was seen by the public as a success, she suffered throughout and recalls her college years as being extremely isolating and alone.

Helen served as an ambassador and fundraiser in the recently formed American Foundation for the Blind, she continued to draw attention from the

media, which portrayed her as a global icon for the blind. However, her public persona leaves out her misgivings about charitable giving and she detest of begging:

"She didn't like doing it, she felt like she was begging. I think she felt it was a step backward in the evolution of being a blind person, to find herself there on a stage asking for money, even though she was not asking for money for herself. I think she perceived it as something that was needed and she was willing to do it because she believed in the cause." (Kleege, 1999)

Though she felt it was the only way she could be useful, she reluctantly agreed to operate within the AFB and the system. Nevertheless, the picture fails to capture her mounting annoyance and deteriorating rapport with a company that was once at the forefront but with time got more and more established.

Helen became a member of the Socialist Party and later defected to the more radical Industrial Workers of the World Organisation. She was resolute in her pursuit of her various and varied political involvements. In addition to co-founding the American Civil Liberties Union, she ran campaigns for birth control, black civil rights, militant women's suffrage, opposition to US war preparations, and protests against the expelling of immigrants. Helen urged people to join the fight, believing that the core of all these initiatives was a basic desire for justice and social equality. She said:

"Many young women full of devotion and goodwill have been engaged in superficial charities. They have tried to feed the hungry without knowing the causes of poverty. They have tried to minister to the sick without understanding the cause of the disease. They have tried to raise fallen sisters without understanding the brutal arm of necessity that struck them down... We attempt social reforms where we need social transformations. We mend small things and leave the great things untouched" ... "The way to help the blind or any other defective class is to understand, correct, and remove the incapacities and inequalities of our entire civilization. (Keller, 1913) A class of college girls...asked me to initiate them into a philanthropic endeavor for the sightless. I told them to study the life that swarms at their very doors... that the best-educated human is the one who understands most about the life in which he is placed... They asked me how to help the blind... I gravely recommended that they study Industrial Economics". (1913)

Most of the people accepted her ideas without knowing how radical they could be since they thought her work for disability rights was consistent with her saintly public persona. Helen was strongly opposed to segregation and persuaded her hosts in Israel to dismantle the blind community after they proudly toured her around the area.

To make her political views more widely known, Helen foolishly accepted a 1920 Hollywood offer to play the lead role in the silent biopic *Deliverance*. Early on, the producer understood that spectators would not be held

captive by the corny picture alone. He made the movie more interesting by adding a lover. This was the only acknowledgment of Helen Keller's sexuality for the public, albeit a very limited one. In the movie, the representative character falls in love with a legendary figure, Ulysses, who is like herself, because of her unrequited and pure love. The people's narrative leaves out the majority of Helen Keller's life, including her greatest achievements and tragic events, because it cannot include a human Helen Keller.

Helen Keller passed away in 1968, and her funeral was the last event connected to her. By her preferred Swedenborgian religion, she had given instructions for a modest, private funeral. However, Helen Keller's family and the trustees of the American Foundation for the Blind disregarded her desires because they did not align with their perception of her. Rather, these image guardians carried out a significant public service and were buried at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC, with full honours so that "even in death, she wasn't free, her image wasn't free" (Fillippeli, 1999).

In 1953, a film biopic titled *The Unconquered* was produced. It tells the tale of the water pump, highlights charitable endeavours, features an icon and high achiever, and displays scenes of domesticity like cleaning and arranging flowers. The spectator is left with a picture of Helen as an elderly, submissive woman who once inspired the entire globe, as it removes all departures from the original image.

According to Fillippeli (1999), Helen Keller is "the little blind girl who overcame adversity to symbolize the triumph of the individual." Despite her longevity, the public's perception of her remains that of an immortal child. She challenges the fundamental core of fiction. She exhorts us to be better than ourselves. To match the image, parts of Helen Keller's life story have been removed from the historical record. However, the image also had a significant impact on and even decided a number of her actual life events over her lifetime.

The director of Perkins School, Michael Anagnos, was the one who first promoted the image. Helen's connection to the institution helped Anagnos become well-known and advance his profession. For the media, it brought increased profits. Neither side seemed to care when stories were made up; the "miracle child" was effectively advancing their agendas.

The image was exploited by Alexander Graham Bell's Association to promote the Speech. Bell saw Helen's schooling as an ingeniously creative experiment that would serve as a helpful instrument in his oralism promotion. She presented her achievements at an educationalist conference and had papers produced about her instruction. (Herrmann, 1998)

Even as an adult, Helen Keller's legacy continued to help others. She stood for significant funding as well

as vital legislative support for the American Foundation for the Blind's advocacy efforts. Particularly during times of crisis, the cunning leaders grabbed upon an image of optimism and resilience. Helen was portrayed as the model during the Cold War, despite her more controversial activities. She also visited wounded soldiers in World War II and was welcomed as an ambassador of peace.

Helen was also aware of the influence her image had. She could access a hostile world more easily by conforming to it, and she had to constantly monitor and control her own actions. She was praised and given attention as a child for fitting in, and she was introduced to powerful individuals who gave her financial stability and paid for her schooling. She needed to maintain piqueing people's interest because else, supplies would run out and she would revert to her terrible seclusion. Maybe it was worth it to keep the image intact. She realised as an adult that the public's admiration for her remained unwavering.

Numerous admirable endeavours pleaded for Helen's name and her presence on the podium. for participation in fundraising teas, character references for sons, daughters, and prisoners, book reviews (please provide a statement that can be placed on the jacket), introductions, and more advertisements for watches, dog food, and cars. (Braddy Henney)

Helen was under tremendous pressure to live up to the stereotype of being a better and more reliable person than her peers who did not have disabilities. She was expected to use her stylus to create and rewrite letters until she reached perfection when she was a child. She was admitted to the top women's college during a period when higher education for any woman was uncommon. She discovered how to show herself so that she might be observed and discussed by the public at large. As a result, she learned to always smile in film footage and to become agitated when people in public asked her inane questions about her blindness:

"quite expert in simulating interest in absurdities that are told me about blind people Putting on my Job-like expression, I tell them that blind people are like other people in the dark, that fire burns them and cold chills them, and they like food when they are hungry, and drink when they are thirsty, that some of them like one lump of sugar in their tea, and others more". (Keller, 1930)

The image has much deeper meaning and consequences for maintaining it in control and the personal sacrifices that Helen had to make. The status quo benefits from an image of bravery and resiliency.

The picture was used to support the concept of individual striving; it conveys the same that I was taught as a child: if someone is motivated enough, they can do anything; if Helen Keller overcame such adversity, there is no reason why she should not be able to. Helen Keller is still frequently assigned reading

in classrooms, particularly in American schools, and the lesson is clear: "Students will forever understand that there is no obstacle so big that it cannot be overcome".

"It's a setup...any comparison to another person who was idolized is a recipe for failure. It never allowed me to feel that people were looking at me. I always thought they were seeing me through 'rose tinted glasses'... whenever I struggled, they would be shocked". (Marcous, 1999)

The concept of personal striving, both then and now, maintains the emphasis on the individual, who is in charge of their own fate. Just as it is our obligation, Helen Keller had to force herself into a world without disabilities. The process of constructing and upholding Helen Keller's image obscures the greater picture.

"People want to keep Helen Keller in a place where they can idolize her and it's like a frozen picture in time, free of any problems, free of any struggles, without oppression, but someone on a pedestal who was amazing, this picture in their minds. That keeps them safe." (Marcous, 1999)

## REVEALING THE TRUTH

The "miracle" at the water pump, signifying her "triumph" against disability served as the focal point of Helen Keller's entire life. Helen Keller's disabilities characterized her life; in press accounts, she was always referred to as "deaf and blind Helen Keller," irrespective of her actions. Although it was implied that she had "overcome" her disabilities, every achievement she made was contextualized considering them. Her disabilities are portrayed in the historical record and the image as tragic ailments that must be surmounted by individual perseverance. They do not consider the difficulties of having a disability or show how her condition affected and defined her life.

Disability, or prejudice, was, in fact, the determining factor. The problems and challenges that molded her life are the same ones that affect people with disabilities generally. The main reason We must put her life in this framework to begin to grasp it.

It was widely encouraged for Helen Keller to write and talk about her experiences with disability. In her later years, she regretted that her autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, which she had written at the age of twenty, had made her hardships seem too simple (Keller, 1930). She never appeared to be able to fully appease people's inquisitiveness about specifics or completely persuade them that she was happy just the way she was. While the non-disabled community praised Helen for her bravery, to her her disabilities were a normal, mostly inert situation (Herrmann, 1998).



She found it difficult to voice her ideas in public and to be taken seriously about issues other than handicap.

Almost every article and speech starts with a request that her ideas be taken seriously because her disabilities were frequently used to refute or invalidate her opinions (Fillippeli, 1985). It was argued by her detractors that a blind -cum- deaf woman could not know a lot about the outside world of normal people and her mistakes were a result of her developmental constraints. While others objected to "the pathetic exploitation of poor Helen Keller," alleging that the socialists were using her disabilities to manipulate her for their own evil purposes.

Many questioned the legitimacy of her political and scholarly accomplishments throughout her life. She never completely got over the idea that, in reality, Annie Sullivan was her puppet, "speaking and writing lines that are fed to her by Annie's genius" (Lash, 1980). Helen's greater and earlier dedication to socialism than Annie's. Years of effort on her speech clarity were partly motivated by these charges; if Helen could address her detractors face-to-face rather than through Annie, her one and only interpreter, maybe people would believe that she was speaking for herself.

It appeared that nobody could get past her limitations, not even those who validated her beliefs or promoted her independence. "Almost as much of a miracle as any of the wonderful physical achievements which are recorded of her," was how they perceived her actions.

Helen Keller's fabricated persona made her stand out for her differences and her seeming victory over them. She continued to be unique enough to pique people's curiosity while also being similar enough to make new acquaintances feel at ease.

She was considered a pet project by Boston's middle class when she was younger. Despite being middle class herself, her disabilities forced her to live on the periphery. Her living expenses and educational expenses were covered by the Boston elite, who also controlled her access to the outside world. Without forcing them to consider their morals too closely, Helen presented them with a humanitarian opportunity. (Klages, 1989)

Her education was mostly focused on developing her appearance as a hearing, seeing person (Klages, 1989). She used language that appealed to all senses to communicate with the people. She was carefully trained to avoid any behaviours that would lead others to mistake her for the blind. She was only ever taken in the right profile until she was a young adult in order to hide her left eye, which appeared to be blind.

Helen Keller was pushed to be primarily intellectual and spiritual both in real life and in the picture. The image's main goal is to inspire others to pursue spiritual development. She doesn't seem physically there in the photograph. She is confined and restricted, and although her movements are orderly,

they lack expression. She was not perceived as sensual, much less sexual, for a woman who relied so much on touch to operate. She transfers her physicality to everyone around her, including Annie Sullivan and other people, and is shown gaining access to the outside world through them.

Even in Helen's adult life, when Annie's function had long since changed to include companion, interpreter, and helper, she was still referred to as Teacher, which perpetuated the idea that Annie was both a liberator and a dependent. Beyond appearances, Annie was far more dependent on Helen. Annie had a rough upbringing in a workhouse, so her chances had never been good. Her career and her connection with Helen provided her with a life that was almost unimaginable for someone from her origins. Their connection was, in fact, mutually dependent.

"It's ironic, isn't it, that Annie Sullivan was a person with a disability herself, but is never really remembered that way and when her disability is noted, it's minimized. It's reduced to insignificance, she has a little eye trouble, and she wears kind of designer sunglasses in *The Miracle Worker*. But we don't think of this as in fact two disabled people mutually supporting one another, we think of it as dependent and professional." (Longmore, 1999)

Annie's family ignored Both - her and her disabled brother -to give her a proper upbringing, which led to her admission to the workhouse due to discrimination. Later on, Annie assisted in saving Helen from a similar outcome. There was probably certainly another connection than the similarities. However, neither Annie's disability nor the reciprocity of their relationship are indicated in the picture. By doing this, the assumed tragedies of disability and the supposed reliance of the crippled would be called into question. We have to accept a fictitious version of Annie Sullivan in order to uphold Helen Keller's fiction.

## **ILLUSIONS OF INDEPENDENCE**

The important person in Helen's life was Annie. Because of a combination of factors like age, youth, personality, and shared experience—as well as a shared goal to move on from their pasts—the relationship gave Helen chances she never would have imagined. It was a very revolutionary arrangement for its day, and it afforded her a level of liberty that few could have envisioned for a child with her limitations. However, it was not the sole option, and it increased Helen's dependence much beyond what was required.

Helen feared being apart from Annie as a child and, as an adult, she feared Annie's passing—not just because she was losing her best friend, but also because of the practical consequences for Helen's life. It was believed that Annie's presence was a necessary condition for Helen to become independent. It wasn't until Annie passed away that it was established that other people could fill her

position, albeit with differing levels of compromise and expertise. Although Annie's relationship could never be replaced, her role was not. Having Annie as her primary carer made Helen's sense of security, independence, and social interaction extremely precarious.

In an era when the little resources available for impaired adults and children were derived from charitable donations, Helen was dependent on the generosity and useful assistance of others. These men are used to being obedient, so even the slightest hint of disobedience turns them against one another. Like the benefactors off to the side in a Renaissance alter piece, Helen understood the importance of a rare piece of art and wanted them to be included in the photo. Although they loved Helen, they did become frustrated when they realized they couldn't handle her. (Henney, Brady, undated)

She was extremely vulnerable under such arrangements since her power to make decisions about her life was also controlled by others if her access to solutions was restricted. What would it have cost her to reject oralism, to express anger or annoyance, to reveal her controversial opinions, or to refuse to comply with others' demands? Hers was a life of compromise and incessant haggling.

She specifically walked a tightrope between her pursuit of left-wing politics and her reliance on mostly right-wing employers or patrons at the American Foundation for the Blind. She was aware that every time she made her political activities public or refused to fit into the mold that others had shaped for her, she was putting her livelihood, reputation, and ability to rely on the goodwill and support of others in danger.

## RETHINKING ICONS

Helen Keller is perceived as someone who professes to be the truth. Rather, it displays an icon, which can be an idol, a symbol, a true person, or a devotional object.

The icon is based on socially acceptable actions or status, or what is considered "successful" in terms of one's career, material or financial prosperity, aesthetic standards, and other things. One or more of these components are thought to be exceptionally present during its creation. The icon excludes the majority by definition and turns into a representation of perfection.

Because of the expectations these pictures of "perfection" set on us, disabled people find them offensive. The symbol is constantly used to portray itself to us as an ideal to aim for and an enforced role model. If the majority is excluded from iconic status, then the majority must undoubtedly fail. This is when the icon starts to cause issues. It spreads a myth that most people can't live up to and few would want to: being flawless means you're not truly human. Although it makes other people more comfortable, it is unjust to Helen and myself. (Marcous, 1999) The most fundamental way that society crippled Helen Keller

was probably the iconic position that was thrust upon her. Icons' actual lives fall short of the stereotype as well.

However, it's her imperfections that draw me in since they show that she's a complicated, flawed, suffering, and most importantly, real person. Her imperfections were frequently her method of surviving. Not because Helen Keller "triumphed" following some enforced standard, but rather because she refused, which is why I want to learn more about her. I never thought I would choose to identify with Helen Keller at some point, but now that she is genuine and human, I see that she's become one of us.

I am not sure at times if her past should inspire hope or discouragement. Since so much of what she was required to comply with seems to have remained the same over the years, I often question what progress we have achieved. However, there are also differences from the circumstances she encountered that indicate to me that we have advanced. She might have greater freedom to choose how she wants to help herself now, as well as easier access to resources. She may feel less alone with other people with disabilities including deafblind people. Maybe she would be making decisions about her communication style. Perhaps she would not have to exert as much effort today.

Because of our advancements, Helen Keller believes that some of the difficulties in her life would have had quite different results today. One aspect of my activism is tackling the Helen Keller tale. It no longer appears like a possibility, even though we previously rejected Helen Keller. We can now use the three-dimensional life to refute Helen Keller's image. Helen Keller and other imposed symbols are ours to adopt and transform. We can explore the details of their life and consider all their complexity.

## CONCLUSION

That is a pointlessly ambiguous question. Helen Keller's disability played a crucial role in shaping the person she became and the life she lived. Her impediment and disability forced her to leave the traditional environment she was raised. Her sexual orientation and familial background predestined her to lead a limited existence as a conventional Southern belle. She would not have been the Helen Keller that a confluence of events produced her, even if she had managed to educate herself and become familiar with socialist concepts. Her exceptional fortitude, intelligence, curiosity, and the benefits of her class, together with her impairment and disability, made her the person she was and made her well-known.

She was unique because she was disabled; like many others, she was forced to create a new life because she could not fit the one, she was born into.

Knowing the problems that shaped her life is important for modern disabled persons. I enjoy

spending time with other disabled people in the present, observing and enhancing the parallels and divergences in our lives, and forging cross-cultural and geographical linkages. My relationship with people with disabilities goes back a long way, and I am starting to recast Helen Keller from a disability perspective. My individual life and activism are placed within a larger context, and I perceive persistent resistance and survival.

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## Corresponding Author

**Neelam Rathi\***

Research Scholar, CCSU, Meerut U.P., India

Email: neelamrathivikas@gmail.com