

Helen Keller: *The World I Live in* (1908) [adapted]

Background:

Helen Keller was born in 1880 in Alabama, the daughter of a newspaper editor. At the age of 1 1/2 she fell ill and became deaf, blind and functionally dumb, with an existence reduced to black silence. All that was left was touch, feeling faces or clothes to recognize people, touching lips. As she grew older she became wild and violent. In March 1887, when she was nearly seven, her parents, on the advice of Alexander Graham Bell, hired a teacher, Anne Mansfield Sullivan. Anne Sullivan came from a background of extreme misery and poverty, blind from the age of five; the family broke up and she was sent to a poorhouse; she went to the Perkins School for the Blind in Boston where she was rude and badly behaved, but improved following operations which partially restored her sight. With this background she was well placed to understand Helen Keller's problems. After first struggling to control Helen's screaming, kicking and biting, Anne taught her the manual alphabet.

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Before my teacher first came to me, I did not know that I am. I lived in a world that was a no-world...I did not know that I know that I lived, or acted, or desired. I had neither will nor intellect. I was carried along to objects or acts by a certain blind natural impetus....I had a power of association...After repeatedly smelling rain and feeling the discomfort of wetness, I acted like those about me: I ran to shut the window. But that was not thought in any sense. It was the same kind of association that makes animals take shelter from the rain.

Have you ever been at sea in a dense fog, when it seemed as if a tangible white darkness shut you in, and the great ship, tense and anxious, groped her way toward the shore with plummet and sounding-line, and you waited with a beating heart for something to happen? I was like that ship before my education began, only I was without compass or sounding-line and had no way of knowing how near the harbor was.

It was the third of March, 1887, three months before I was seven years old. The morning after my teacher came she gave me a doll. The little blind children at the Perkins Institution had sent it and Laura Bridgman had dressed it; but I did not know this until afterward. When I had played with it a little while, Miss Sullivan slowly spelled into my hand the word "d-o-l-l." I was at once interested in this finger play and tried to imitate it. Running downstairs to my mother I held up my hand and

made the letter for doll. I did not know that I was spelling a word or even that words existed; I was simply making my fingers go in a monkey-like imitation. One day, while I was playing with my new doll, Miss Sullivan put my big rag doll into my lap also, spelled “d-o-l-l” and tried to make me understand that “d-o-l-l” applied to both. I became impatient at her repeated attempts and, seizing the new doll, I dashed it upon the floor.

She brought me my hat, and I knew I was going out into the warm sunshine. We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Some stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. On entering the door I remembered the doll I had broken. I felt my way to the hearth and picked up the pieces. I tried vainly to put them together. Then my eyes fill with tears; for I realized what I had done, and for the first time I felt repentance and sorrow.

When I learned the meaning of “I” and “me” and found that I was something, I began to think. Then consciousness first existed for me.

Answer:

1. What is consciousness?

2. What does Helen Keller’s story tell us about the relationship between *language* and *consciousness*?