The Story of My Life

Introduction

Helen Keller (1880-1968) had a remarkable life and most children will find her story fascinating. Although Helen was blind and deaf, her tutor, Anne Sullivan, taught her how to communicate, and the pair remained very close until Sullivan's death in 1936. Helen attended several specialised educational institutions and successfully earned a degree in 1904. Today, Helen is still remembered for her achievements; she has appeared on American currency and stamps, and has lent her name to streets, hospitals and schools.

Answers

1. E.g. It is written in the first person. It recalls events from Helen’s life.
2. E.g. I think it means Helen’s blindness. Because she can’t see, there is only darkness.
3. E.g. Because she remembered waving to guests before her illness.
4. E.g. Because Helen knew she would get what she wanted if she kicked her nurse. Helen also felt angry and frustrated at not being able to speak and this was how she let out her anger.
5. E.g. Helen admits she was very mean to Martha, so Martha probably didn’t like Helen very much. She was probably also scared of Helen, because Helen says that Martha nearly always did what Helen wanted her to do.
6. Any appropriate answer. E.g. If I was blind and deaf I wouldn’t be able to do a lot of the things I like to do, like listen to music and play football. I wouldn’t have any independence because I would probably need someone to help me do simple things like go to the shops or cross the road.

Extra Activities

- Discuss the differences between autobiographical and biographical writing. Ask pupils to research important events in Helen Keller’s life, e.g. meeting her teacher Anne Sullivan for the first time, going to college, receiving her degree, meeting Winston Churchill etc. Then ask pupils to write an account of one of the events they’ve researched in a biographical style.

- Drawing on pupils’ research for the first activity, discuss whether they think Helen Keller’s disability held her back. Are pupils surprised that she achieved so much? Do pupils think Helen’s life would have been different if she hadn’t lost her hearing and her sight?

- Explain to pupils that a play called The Miracle Worker was made about Helen Keller and her teacher, Anne Sullivan. The events in it were based on events from Helen Keller’s autobiography. Ask pupils to re-read the final paragraph of the extract, then write a playscript for a scene in which Helen and Martha Washington play together as children.

- Helen could read braille. Introduce children to the braille alphabet. Can pupils write their name in braille (by colouring in the dots rather than raising them)? Divide pupils into pairs, then ask each pupil to write their own message in braille. Pupils should swap messages with their partner, then decipher the one they receive.