A Corpus-Based Exploration of Debates over Helen Keller's Work and Public Image

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Abstract: Helen Keller's work has been lauded for confronting disability and battling social inequity but also criticised for its racial orientation, Western prejudice, and fixation on disability. This stylometric study used corpus tools to identify genre-specific linguistic patterns and stylistic alterations within Keller's oeuvre. A sociographic examination of the most frequent n-grams reveals how Keller's deafblindness anchors both the positive and negative associations with her persona and how idolisation of Keller as an inspirational exemplar is inseparable from the exploitation and social stigmatisation of her disabilities. Keller frames disabled people as a subject worthy of an audience's interest, but her first-person pronoun collocations demonstrate that she wields multiple voices that construct different identities in her personal correspondence, published memoirs, and public addresses. The frequency and concordance of proper nouns and keywords add validity to critiques of her sociopolitical positions.

Keywords: corpus analysis, disability solidarity, Helen Keller, illness narrative, inclusivity

1. Introduction

Helen Keller is among literature's most controversial icons of triumph and inspiration, but some have simply brushed aside her sociopolitical convictions and dismissed her as a mere symbol (Kriegel and Lichtenstein 2024). Indeed, public perceptions have often reduced her literary endeavours to an expression of her deafblindness, dismissing her philosophical treatises and intellectual complexity and framing her works as a narrative of overcoming disability rather than as a literary achievement in their own right. As Crow (2000: 22) suggests, "The public image cannot incorporate a Keller that is human and so the largest part of her life".

As a deafblind person, everyday autonomy and navigating the environment presented significant challenges. Thus, Keller's caregivers, educators, relatives, and companions helped her to integrate into society. Caregivers are responsible for decoding the body language, gestures, and facial expressions of the deafblind and tolerate the frustrations that overwhelm the disabled when they fail to communicate a feeling, need or thought. In addition, caregivers or personal companions are the mediators between the deafblind and the society. The more successful the mediators

are, the more integrated the deafblind in society (Intini et al. 2022). Keller's life has often been reduced to universal disability representation. The word "inspiring" remains almost always linked to titles reflecting her work as cultural icon. Herrman (1999) in her book about Keller's life kept emphasising the "inspiring example" and "inspiring childhood" of Keller. Keller's "inspiring" efforts were rarely discussed outside the disability context (Herrman 1999). Saeki (2014) stood among few examples associating inspiration with Keller's diplomatic efforts in Japan. She considered Keller a reason for improving international relations between America and Japan after her 1948 visit (Saeki 2014). Therefore, Keller's companions were instrumental in developing her public image.

This study explores Keller's inner and outer social circles, including Anna Sullivan, Polly Thompson and Keller's parents, who played undeniable roles in Keller's continuous progress (Stothert-Maurer, Arnott and Hale 2016). Sullivan arguably held the most impactful position during Keller's formative years as a learner and author by devising manual alphabet symbols, brokering relationships with literary circles, curating reading materials for Keller's evolving intellect and interpreting during interviews. Their collaboration challenges the conventional notion of authorship by emphasising the interdependent and collaborative aspects of literary creation, especially for individuals with disabilities. We aim to answer the following questions:

(1) How did the presence of companions affect the construction of Keller's public image?
(2) Why has Keller's image been reduced to 'disabled' rather than 'author'?
(3) How did Keller employ different voices and rhetorical strategies across her various writings—including correspondence, articles, and autobiographies to navigate and potentially resist social framing of disability?

2. Literature review

2.1 Corpus tools in English literary studies

Corpus tools have permeated several cultural, literary, and sociological inquiries. Crosthwaite, Ningrum and Schweinberger (2023) highlighted the overall surge in the deployment of corpus linguistics across arts and humanities research, especially over the past two decades. Nearly 200 languages adopt such methodologies, with English enthroned as the most opulently resourced and globally pivotal language. Corpus-based textual analysis divulges frequent and infrequent lexical patterns. It reveals syntactic structures and their distribution. Thus, multiple re-readings become possible even for classical texts previously examined through qualitative approaches (Biber 2011). Still, no large-scale corpus study has examined how authorial agency emerges—or is obscured—in disability life writing, particularly when mediated by companions or editors.

Michel et al. (2011) procedurally pressed out several historical and cultural associations through the analysis of a large-scale corpus comprising five million books. They derived insightful historical and cultural information embedded in

linguistic forms. Among their most intriguing frequency-based discoveries stood the growth rate estimation of English vocabulary. They based their estimation on the number of novel words coined in English over decades. At the grammatical level, they documented the co-existence of regular and irregular verb patterns. Forms like "finded" and "found" persisted almost two centuries before one achieved predominance. They also correlated collective memory with the prominence of mentioning temporal unit. The frequency of mentioning specific time units such as "year 1951" during a restricted span, including preceding and succeeding periods, reveals how historically important that year was.

Schulz and Bahník (2019) employed corpus tools to probe gender associations in twentieth-century English fiction. They studied bi-grams incorporating gender indexing words like "man" and "woman" and gender-neutral terms like "person" and "child." They analysed adjectival collocations with gender-related vocabulary according to psycho-cognitive dimensions, such as desirability and masculinity. Results highlighted generally positive descriptions of both men and women. They nevertheless pointed to a remarkable decline in positive adjectives characterising women in the 20th century novels (Schulz and Bahník, 2019). However, their approach has not been applied to autobiographical corpora where authors with disabilities might strategically navigate—or resist—social framings of the 'disabled body' versus 'authorial voice.'

Narrowing literary perspective, Aguirre (2016) wielded corpus tools to dissect n-grams collocating with "echo" in Peter Teuthold's *The Necromancer*. Corpus-based analysis of recurrent patterns demonstrated how "echo" occurrences characterised Gothic style and depicted horror experiences. Exploring frequent constructions like "echoed to the sound of our footsteps" and "[T]he hollow echo repeated" revealed how disparate the lexical fields of sound and space combine to create Gothic effects (Aguirre 2016). Yet this method remains underutilised in examining whether disabled writers employed distinct stylistic registers across genres (e.g., letters, articles, and memoirs) to negotiate public versus private identities.

Similarly, a corpus analysis of Isabella Hammad's *The Parisian*, adopting the framework of Post-colonialism and Orientalism, detected binary opposition between the East and the West in frequency wordlists. Concordance analysis further explored such opposition. Qualitative examination of corpus findings revealed three oppositions: Character oppositions emerged in the priest and the Imam; geographical oppositions appeared in France and Palestine; and human characteristics were divided into civilised and uncivilised. The authors expounded how such oppositions perpetuated negative stereotypes associated with the East from Post-colonial vantage (Awajan and Nofal 2023).

Other corpus tool deployments in literary and cultural contexts encompassed disability memoir analysis (Alshammari 2025; Alshammari and Abdelzaher 2025). Dystopian novels targeting young adults underwent interpretation within several frameworks (Khalil 2020). Alshammari and Abdelzaher (2025) probed content and function words, morphological markers, and regex (i.e., regular expressions).

Regex are argued to encode temporality (e.g., tense markers, then, now), space (e.g., locative prepositional phrases and society (e.g., addressing terms and kinship vocabulary). Analysing these deictic expressions illuminated how dystopian worlds are constructed through temporal images, central focus on faraway locales and flexible interactional society.

Mirroring previously mentioned investigations, our study endeavours to wield corpus linguistic tools to explore Keller's oeuvre from literary and cultural perspectives. Following the literature, we investigate word frequencies, n-grams, concordance and collocates of target function and content keywords. We employ corpus findings to construct arguments regarding debates over Keller's public image construction. Disability Studies, feminist discourse analysis, and corpus stylistics are integrated through a triangulation framework wherein theoretical insights inform the selection of linguistic features analyzed, discourse patterns are interpreted through disability and feminist lenses, and stylistic findings are validated against qualitative textual evidence.

2.2 Keller: A writer with disability or a disabled writer

Narrative structure in Keller's memoir adheres to broader literary tradition of illness narratives. These emphasise lived patient experience. They challenge prevailing biomedical narratives. Although not explicitly classified as illness narrative, Keller's life writing shares similarities with this genre. It provides intimate depiction of her experiences as deafblind individual. We contend that Keller's writings transcend reduction to disabled writings.

Disabled authors have argued against reducing disabled authors to writers with disabilities (Johnstone 2004). Hughes articulates: "Disability justice requires responses acknowledging that experiences and perceptions of disability remain complex and context-specific" (Hughes 2023: 12). Tom Shakespeare, a leading Disability Studies scholar, admits that he "avoided learning more about Helen Keller, one of the most famous disabled people of all time, deterred by the over-sentimentalised depictions of her" (Blog https://farmerofthoughts.co.uk/collected_pieces/helen-keller/).

Echoing Shakespeare's admission, many scholars have neglected Keller's writing or identity. From disability justice rationale, we posit that Keller's identity lacked multidimensional recognition. She produced myriad works clamouring shifting identities and growth as individual and writer. Recently, disabled writers have admitted they could not connect with Keller's work. This stems from how her public image has been constructed as inspirational (Oates 2023; Thorneycroft 2023). Only recently Keller's image has undergone deconstruction.

Keller's work has often been read as autobiography, memoir, or correspondence. Seldom has it been interpreted as illness narrative or autopathography. According to Couser in his seminal work *Recovering Bodies*:

> Bodily dysfunction may stimulate what I call autopathography-autobiographical narrative of illness or disability-by heightening one's

> awareness of one's mortality, threatening one's sense of identity, and disrupting the apparent plot of one's life. Whatever form it takes, bodily dysfunction tends to heighten consciousness of self and of contingency (Couser 1997: 5).

Keller's work emerged chiefly when Disability Studies and illness narratives had not enriched autobiographies. Thus, Keller's work received categorisation as autobiography. Couser's work in life writing and disability calls for genre integration focusing on disability and illness as significant life components. This approach avoids reducing the writer to disabled category. Rather, it considers how the writer incorporates disability experience into narrative. From narrative stance, illness narratives fixate upon the desire to situate illness as main thematic concern. They still reflect upon changes wrought by illness. Keller's sudden disability onset influenced her entire life trajectory. It afforded her chances to reflect upon her life multiple times throughout diverse narrative works and genres. Her blindness constitutes the starting point of journey into self and self-inquiry.

Analysing pronouns, collocations, and lexical patterns in Keller's texts can unveil these multiple voices and identity shifts. This corpus-based approach directly addresses how linguistic features manifest her evolving self-construction across genres.

3. Data and method

We adopt a mixed-method approach to analyse a carefully curated selection of Keller's work. The corpus comprises 16 autobiographies, books, articles, and personal correspondences spanning 1887 to 1960, with at least two texts selected from each decade. The corpus is divided by writing or publication date and text type. We intentionally select samples of her writings spanning 80 years. Each decade receives representation through at least two texts. This biennial sampling proves sufficient because Keller's stylistic evolution manifests gradually. Major shifts occur across decades rather than years. Two texts per decade capture representative linguistic patterns while maintaining corpus manageability. Selection criteria prioritise genre diversity, historical distribution, and textual accessibility. Table 1 describes the corpus analysed in this article, detailing each text's genre, publication date, and archival source.

Therefore, the processed corpus consists of 49 documents, fully tokenised into 2,812923 tokens. Tokenisation preserved punctuation and structural markers, while lexical normalisation reduced surface-form variability. Automatic part-of-speech tagging using the Sketch Engine tools assigned each token to one of 9 POS categories using a tagset comprising 63 fine-grained tags.

Table 1. The size and distribution of the analysed texts over time and genre

Time	**Representation in corpus**	**Number of files**	**Word count**
1887-1900	Letters	13	132,547
1901-1910	Autobiography, articles, book, letters	10	552,733
1911-1920	Articles, books, letters	10	114,671
1921-1930	Articles, autobiography, letters	5	760,021
1931-1940	Autobiography, diaries, letters	7	836,098
1941-1950	Book, letter	2	70,354
1951-1960	Article, book	2	346,499
Total			2,812923

Lemmatisation collapsed inflectional variants lists of unique lemmas, and combined lemma–POS representations produced a list of representative vocabulary entries. The corpus-based analysis aims at revealing the most frequent words, keywords and n-grams in Keller's corpus. We also specifically target instances of human and non-human companions of Helen through a list of words (e.g., *teacher, Anne, Polly, book, literature, reading, writing*). We examined the most frequent collocates of first-person pronouns to unveil the identity Keller expressed in her writings. We also compare Keller's literary and stylistic features across the different genres she wrote in order to reveal any changes in her authorial voice. Sketch Engine was used for n-gram, keyword, and collocation analysis of the corpus, employing log-likelihood ratios to identify keyness with a significance threshold of $p < 0.05$. Collocation extraction employed mutual information scores above 3.0 and frequency thresholds of 5 or higher, with t-scores and local mutual information (LMI) metrics applied to validate findings against chance occurrence and weight results by absolute co-occurrence frequencies. AntConc was used for n-gram and keyword analysis of the corpus, and Orange's text mining package was used for multi-scale collocation extraction and visualisation (Demšar et al. 2013). For the collocation measures, the primary analysis used log-likelihood ratios with minimum thresholds. Collocation extraction employed mutual information scores above 3.0 and frequency thresholds of 5 or higher. Complementary t-scores were used to identify high-frequency collocations that appeared with frequencies that exceeded chance. Local mutual information metrics were used to weigh standard PMI scores by their absolute co-occurrence frequencies to balance statistical significance with practical salience (Abdelzaher and Toth in press).

This directly addresses research question three regarding identity construction across genres. Frequency analysis reveals which self-referential forms predominate in particular text types. Collocation patterns illuminate how Keller positioned herself relative to disability, society, and authorship across her career.

4. Results and discussion

The analysis of a purpose-built corpus based on selections of Keller's writings enabled us to answer the study's research questions and offer a new reading of Keller's works. The themes Keller discussed are reflected in her most frequent words (Figure 1). The words *blind* and *teacher* – the most frequent – were central to Keller's corpus from her first letters written in the 1880s until her last book in the 1950s. Keller frequently discussed the theme of disability, as reflected in her increasing use of *blindness*, *eyes*, *deaf*, *dark*, *see*, *hear* and *sight* over time. However, other types of disability (e.g., motion-related) were not present in her writings, which focused mainly on her own physical disabilities. This may have negatively affected the power of her socialist arguments and reduced her narrative to that of a disabled writer, not a thinker.

The same personal perspective applies to her concerns with the main international events of her time. Despite frequently referring to *people*, *human*, *world*, *peace* and *war*, the countries with the greatest weight in her corpus were her homeland, *America*, and *Scotland*, where she studied and was awarded an honorary PhD. Furthermore, despite Keller's interest in the social and political problems of the physical world, she was also attached to a spiritual world and frequently talked about *God*, *love*, *soul*, and *religion*.

As shown in the word cloud in Figure 1, people in Keller's inner circle frequently appear in her writings, including her *mother*, *Polly*, *Sullivan*, and *friends*, as did multiple honorifics: *Miss*, *Mrs*, *Mr.*, and *Dr*. In addition to the presence of human companions, Keller benefitted from the constant company of books, both as a reader and as a writer. The word cloud also shows Keller's passion for language, learning and thinking through the high frequencies of the words *book*, *books*, *write*, *wrote*, *word*, *words*, *read*, *letter*, *letters*, *story*, *education*, *school*, *knowledge*, and *journal*.

Figure 1. Word cloud of the most frequent words in Keller's corpus

4.1 Companions in Keller's life

The first research question considers how Keller's companions influenced the construction of her public image. A chronological investigation of the concordance of a set of target words facilitated answering this question. Keller found companionship both in people and in books. References to Anne Sullivan, Polly Thomson and books were detected using the following search terms: *teacher*, *Anne*, *Miss Sullivan*, *Mrs Macy*, *Polly Thomson*, *Miss Thomson*, *book*, *story*, *novel*, *poem*, *literature*, *read* and *write*. Figure 2 shows the distribution of Keller's mentions of companions in her corpus.

Although Anne Sullivan played an integral part in Keller's social and educational life and career since they met in 1887, Keller's association with books as a reader, writer, and learner was quantitatively stronger than her association with her human companions. Keller's passion for language and books even appeared in her very first letter, written at the age of seven, only a few months after she started her learning journey with Sullivan. The letter included five mentions each of *book* and *read* and nine of *write*.

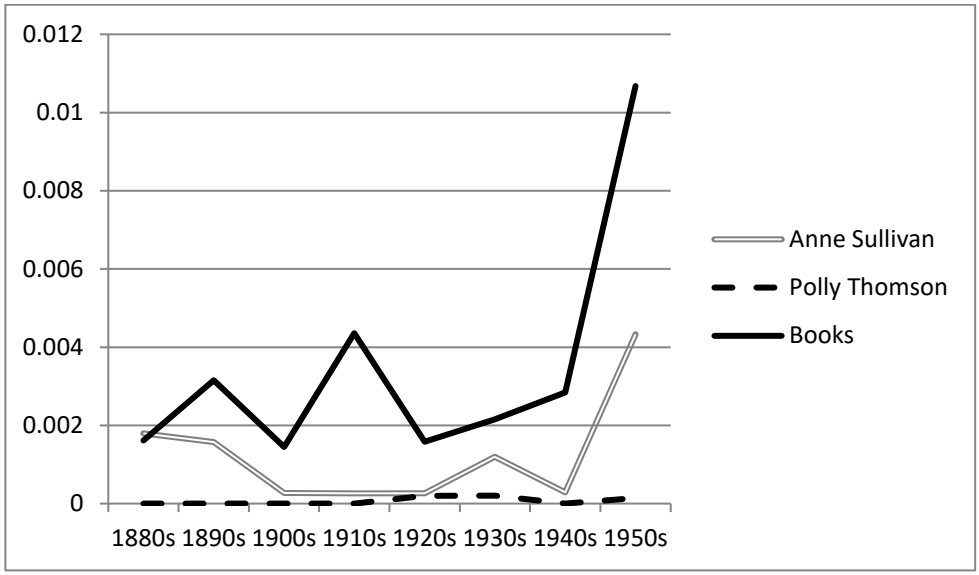

Figure 2. Comparative frequency chart of human and literary companions over time

Themes of language and learning were dominant in her early writings and remained until her final works. Throughout her life, she wrote multiple articles on the importance of education, especially for deaf and blind children. The concordance lines elucidate how Keller's attachment to books developed from a childish love for animal stories to a critical reader and writer, as displayed in Table 2. The collocates of *book* used to be *fox, tigers* and *lions* in the letters Keller wrote in 1887 and 1888. Abstract words such as *political*, *spiritual* and *reason* started to appear in the concordance lines of *book* from 1920s onward. Although the frequency of *book* fluctuated during the first decades of Keller's writing, it steadily grew since 1920s.

Secondary to books, Anne Sullivan was the most valued companion to Helen Keller in her childhood, youth, and elder life. Sullivan's presence in Keller's writing increased the most after Sullivan's death in 1936. Keller repeatedly mentioned Sullivan in her diaries (1936-1937) and wrote a book about their relation in her *Teacher* (1955). Sullivan was the first and one of the few people in Keller's life who could deal with her as a human, not as a disabled. Sullivan and Keller represent a marvellous case of disability, solidarity, and belief in humanity. Keller's speech at Glasgow University's graduation ceremony in 1932 was inspired by her immense gratitude towards her companions. She wondered "[w]hat would human life be without the sympathy of our fellow-beings?" She valued the support of each person in her life, especially Sullivan. She reflected on Sullivan's role saying "[w]hen I think what one loving human being has done for me, I realise what will someday happen to mankind when hearts and brains work together."

Table 2. Sample concordance of *book* in Helen Keller's corpus

Year	Sample	Genre
1887-1888	did read in my *book* about fox and box read stories in my *book* about tigers and lions	Letters
1894-1895	shall prize the little *book* always I hear Mr Hutton's pen dancing over the pages of his new *book*	Letters
1903	instructive than any other *book* on a political subject terrible directness in the *book* of Esther	Autobiography
1927	I conceive of this *book* as a spiritual your fate in the *Book* of Life	Books
1929	the process of shaping a *book* is not like urged to write a *book* about the blind	Autobiography
1937	with his *book* The Age of Reason showing a talking *book* and a record	Diaries
1955	other defects of the *book* which my mature sense I hope in this *book* to invest in our joint struggles and triumphs	Books

Table 3 shows the presence of companions in Keller's most frequent trigrams, i.e., corpus-driven three-word collocational patterns, through years. The concordance lines reveal what human companions represent to Keller through years. Whereas in the first decade Keller was focused on her social roles as a *daughter*, *child*, *cousin* and *friend*, the presence of other supporting females in the inner circle of Keller was manifested later in 1890s and 1900s. The most frequently mentioned male figure in the corpus was Dr. Bell (Alexander Graham Bell), who was the first one to advise Keller's parents about her education and remained a good and supporting friend of hers.

Reading Keller's work is to read about a plethora of voices and connections with the other. As Garnier argues:

> Keller repeatedly distances herself from the entrapment of autobiography, by inviting outsiders…a long list of friends, secretaries, reporters and publishers (Peter Fagan, John Macy, Polly Thomson, Nella Braddy, Winnie Corbally) and countless correspondents (Alexander Graham Bell, Mark Twain, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Albert Einstein among others (Garnier 2020: 56).

Table 3. The most frequent trigrams in Helen Keller's corpus (based on likelihood ratio)

Years	**Most frequent trigrams** (*collocational patterns derived from corpus analysis*)
1880s	Friend Helen Keller, daughter Helen Keller, cousin Helen Keller, pupil Helen Keller, child Helen Keller
1890s	*Miss Caroline Derby*, *Mrs Laurence Hutton*, sister Helen Keller, loving Helen Keller, friend Helen Keller
1900s	*Miss Sullivan* + (descriptions, came, talked, taught, ideas, assistance, visited), accompanied *Miss Sullivan*
1910s	Faithfully Helen Keller, poor Helen Keller, Helen Keller mistakes, Helen Keller refrain, using Helen Keller
1920s	*Sullivan Dr Bell*, *Dr Bell* saw, *Dr Bell* assistant, *Dr Bell* family, *Dr Bell* forecast, *Dr Bel*l foresaw
1930s	Faithfully Helen Keller, sincerely Helen Keller, cordially Helen Keller
1940s	Horizon men women, Men women majestic, men women mindful, odyssey men women, children men women
1950s	*Anne Sullivan*, New York City, American Foundation overseas, deaf blind deaf, New York lighthouse, meetings New York

Keller was supported and mentored by various individuals throughout her life. These contributed to her life-stories, all put together and documented in various genres. Her love for books and literature proves evident throughout her narratives. They continue to carry her along, teach her about the world and allow her to imagine and reflect on human complexities and emotions. For instance, she calls books "my book-friends." She brings them closer to real life companions and friends (Keller 1903).

Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed, in her seminal work *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), suggests that books can serve as companions in one's survival kit (p. 16). She refers to these books as "companion texts." In similar vein, Keller carried her companion texts as friends. She reflected upon them as she navigated life and illness. An illness narrative reflects on embodiment, life's obstacles of pain and survival. It also looks at what could be meaningful about a life marked by illness. To fit this genre, Keller's work remains in constant dialogue not just with her inner thoughts but also with others.

In many ways, Keller was constantly engaging with literature for insight into her life. She sought reflection on life's events, including the loss of her teacher. For instance, she writes: "The deepest sorrow knows no time — it seems an eternal night. Truly did Emerson say that when we travel, we do not escape from ourselves, we carry with us the sadness which blurs all places and all days" (Keller 1936).

She also considers the role of reading not just in her life but in the life of others: "As I read and study, I find that this is what the rest of the race has done. Man looks within himself and in time finds the measure and the meaning of the universe." (Keller 1908) Keller's interest in poetry and drama proves evident when she writes about Shakespeare's work. She describes the emotional effect of reading *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. These are literary companions that she carries with her in her life-journey: "I do not remember a time since I have been capable of loving books that I have not loved Shakespeare" (Keller 1903).

We suggest that Keller's literary accomplishments are both a result of her love for language and literature as well as the support of Sullivan. Companionship takes many forms, through friendships, connections, and a love for books. All of these factors contribute to Keller's material. They birth multiple texts and genres that expand and capitalise on genres of autobiography and illness narratives.

4.2 Prioritising the disabled over the writer persona

The second research question in the study considered the reasons for reducing Keller's image to 'disabled' rather than 'author.' The collocates of *write, writer, journal, magazine,* among other words encoding the activity of writing provide insights into this claim. Keller's passion for writing appears in the positive collocations that feature the word '*write,'* such as '*happy to write,'* '*delighted to write'* and '*glad to write.'* Collocations of '*write'* likewise reveal the various invitations to write that she received, with phrases like 'asked to write' and 'me to write' appearing throughout the corpus.

Unfortunately, most invitations she received framed her as disabled rather than as a writer. Keller described this struggle in her 1929 autobiography; she wanted to pursue writing as profession but she described the directions from editors and publishers. Keller routinely received a particularly frustrating instruction. She thus remained constantly constrained to limited views of her own life experiences.

Despite her long active years in writing, editorial interest in Keller's work centred mostly upon disability-related experiences rather than her opinions as intellectual or writer. Keller explained in her 1912 article "How I became a socialist" that commercial journal editors frequently approached her as writer. She declared that the socialist press showed no interest in her articles or views as socialist. Conversely, the capitalist press sought to exploit her as disabled writer. Keller clearly stated the reason for enormous invitations she garnered for interview in response to becoming a subject for newspaper gossip. This statement emphasises her awareness and reflexivity when examining her life journey and interactions with others. At the time, ableist politics and inspiration porn had not entered the Disability justice movement. She remained unable to articulate her frustration with stigmatising and oppressive views of ableist media and the general public. She refers to herself as "a subject for newspaper gossip." This emphasises how Keller's narrative has been historically and publicly orchestrated to represent disability in American history and culture.

Keller narrated how a Swedish educator exploited and promoted *absurd myths* about her deafblindness, although she had met Keller in person. The educator preferred talking about amusing myths to stating facts. Keller stated in her 1929 autobiography that "She [Swedish educator] had told me with amusement the myths she had read about me that I could paint pictures and play the piano, and that I had a great gift for sculpture. Yet when she returned to Sweden, she disseminated myths quite as absurd as these. She wrote an article full of misinformation" (p. 85). Crutchfield (2005) argues that the freak persona is the construction of her uniqueness, her one-of-a-kind physicality, heightened from normal viewers. This persona was constructed for decades. It further reduced Keller to a mere symbol of disability.

The press exploited Keller's disability as an interesting subject to entertain the readers. She was repeatedly asked to focus exclusively on her experiences as a deafblind person. In contrast, Keller did not advocate encouraging a disabled person to write or do something they are not good at. Keller asked for a true evaluation of the output of people with disabilities, using the same criteria as for other people who are not disabled. She believed that to buying articles written by a blind person is worthless in the long run (Snapp 2019; Watson 2021).

The following concordance lines (Table 4) compare the instances in which Keller hoped to be taken seriously as a writer to the occasions in which she was stereotyped as a disabled.

Table 4. A sample of Helen Keller's framing as a disabled writer in contrast with her wishes to be a writer

I was *asked* to *write* a sketch of *my life* for the Youth's Companion.
I was *asked* to prepare a paper on the *blind*
What right has she to *write* about landscapes she *can't see*?
I had often been *urged* to *write* a book about the *blind*
she...suggested ways in which I could best use my *writing* and speech in service to the *handicapped*.
We are not even entitled to sympathy, yet some of us can *write* articles that will help his paper to make money! …We are not nice, but we are interesting.
it is *not* very *pleasant* to *write* all about one's *self*.
I *write* because my heart cries out
The great difficulty of *writing* is to make the language of the educated mind express our confused ideas, half feelings, half thoughts
I am *resolved* to be myself, to live my own life and *write* my own *thoughts* when I have any

4.3 Helen's multiple voices

The third question of the study inquired about the different voices Keller employed across her writings (letters, articles, and autobiographies) to navigate the social framing of the disabled. Keyword extractions and the collocations of personal pronouns enabled answering this question.

Table 5. Clustering of the top-ranked keywords in Keller's corpus

Persona	**Sample keywords**
Writer	Letter, journal, wrote, write, books, words
Learner	Books, read, education, spelled, school
Disabled	Blind, blindness, deaf, Braille, sightless, handicapped, sense, deafness
Socialist	Russia, humanity, mankind

Table 5 presents a taxonomy of the most common keywords according to their identity constructions; fluid personas are revealed by lexical discriminators and by the use of '*we'* to refer to different and distinct groups and collective affiliations, analogous to Mahlberg's character-voice differentiation in fictional discourse (Mahlberg and Wiegand 2018; Mahlberg et al. 2019). The use of the log-likelihood metric mitigates any corpus-size disparities that might otherwise have obscured minority-voice patterns in Keller's fragmented and decades-spanning writing, prioritising robustness over raw frequencies using four-term calculations that account for presence and absence distributions across the compared corpora (Hoover 2017). Table 6 shows a sample of all collocational metrics for the most representative autobiography-related words.

This study defined diversification across epistolary, monographic, journalistic and autobiographical forms. As tabulated, most of Keller's keywords are associated with the disabled persona. Although the disability words were also employed in a socialist context, but their priming effect remain relevant to disability more than socialism. In addition, other socialist thoughts such as children rights, worker strikes, and gender equality did not appear among the keywords in Keller's writings. Whether imposed by the society or unintentionally adopted, the disabled persona was remarkable of Keller's projected voices.

Keller's literary contributions, primarily her most-studied autobiography *The Story of My Life*, can be considered as life writing penned by a woman. It constitutes an illness narrative viewed through the lens of disability studies. Keller's writings detail her experiences with deafblindness. Keller's work navigates the experiences of ableism and society's stigmatisation of illness and disability. Her work, we argue, offers fruitful ground for discussion on illness narratives. It illuminates the experience of being disabled in ableist society. Her experiences are recorded in reflexive manner. They call into question her experiences with others. For instance, she does not clearly state that ableism permeates her everyday life. Rather she writes: "Many persons, having perfect ears, are emotionally deaf. Yet these are the very ones who dare to set limits to the vision of those who, lacking a sense or two, have will, soul, passion, imagination" (Keller 1908: 25).

Table 6. Collocational metrics (T-score, MI, logDice, and MI) for selected words

Collocate	**Freq**	**Coll. freq.**	**T-score**	**MI**	**logDice**	**MI3**
We	347	846	18.24555	5.60631	10.92605	22.48389
The	409	2355	19.24331	4.36647	10.83184	21.71839
I	902	11400	26.83741	3.23227	10.81575	22.86623
was	377	4634	17.40703	3.27241	10.3248	20.38925
It	244	1299	14.92032	4.47958	10.31029	20.34105
He	165	919	12.24286	4.41443	9.83567	19.14707
But	152	672	11.8699	4.74764	9.77879	19.24349
She	134	587	11.14889	4.7609	9.61875	18.89308
had	174	2627	11.51412	2.97577	9.54642	17.86166
not	170	3580	10.7266	2.49568	9.34297	17.31446
my	169	4116	10.33422	2.28588	9.24701	17.08764
have	142	2892	9.87301	2.54392	9.20394	16.84342
us	113	1354	9.55771	3.30919	9.18718	16.94955
our	102	1515	8.8365	2.99935	9.00332	16.3442
them	81	1349	7.73799	2.8342	8.70799	15.5139
this	73	1183	7.37822	2.87362	8.5962	15.25327
They	63	444	7.46627	4.07489	8.56736	16.02945
If	61	310	7.47606	4.54664	8.55678	16.40812
When	60	389	7.32314	4.19529	8.51162	16.00907
am	65	846	7.17876	3.18988	8.50963	15.23462
for	100	3999	6.63299	1.57046	8.50863	14.85817
has	68	1296	6.92296	2.63964	8.4677	14.81457
How	55	210	7.17779	4.95914	8.43485	16.52186
can	65	1213	6.79549	2.67003	8.42176	14.71477
Then	54	193	7.12734	5.05446	8.41309	16.56423
For	54	249	7.06317	4.68691	8.39761	16.19669
Teacher	56	646	6.75649	3.36399	8.34485	14.9787
life	59	969	6.61898	2.85432	8.33985	14.6196
time	55	782	6.52839	3.06236	8.28451	14.62508
their	62	1709	6.04658	2.10729	8.24274	14.01568
Our	44	109	6.4949	5.58328	8.14117	16.50214

The keywords still reveal significant instances of resistance and effort to adopt voices of a writer, a learner, and a socialist. Consistently, the referents of '*we'* crystalise the several groups Keller attempted to identify herself with and give a hint about the credibility of her humanistic and socialist (rather than western) perspectives. In all references, she was keen on being an actively contributing member of society. At the time, inclusivity was not a key component in de-stigmatising disability politics and the narrative of disability as tragic. Keller was able to identify with both abled-bodied Americans and the disabled community, always both an outsider and an insider, always on the margins and yet a central figure to American history (see Table 7).

Table 7. Sample of the groups Keller identified herself with

Identifying group	**Sample sentences**
Americans	*we* are free to print and mail any innocent matter Surely it is not in *us* to falter as *we* witness the faith which has sustained humanity in ages past. *we* are willing to die for free thought and liberty of action.
American women	*we* feel that this arbitrary act is taken without consideration of the American spirit *we* are taught, generation after generation, that purity and womanliness are the only weapons *we* need in the contest of life.
American socialists	great assistance in the work which *we* have been trying to do for the blind a system that is the cause of much of the physical blindness and deafness which *we* are trying to prevent In a small corner of this vast social distress *we* find *our* unemployed blind
Disabled	*we* are ordinary folk limited by an extraordinary incapacity. *we* are not even entitled to sympathy
Humans	*we* accept the sunshine and love of our friends Could *we* choose our environment
Blindness scholars	And what *we* should know…is that much of this blindness can be prevented *we* cannot be certain that all of the virulent microscopic germs are removed
Educated women	*we* are too docile under formal instruction.

Keller's self-fashioning – flexibly using '*we'* to refer to herself as part of different groups – thus constitutes her primary mechanism for challenging

narratives of the tragedy of disability while remaining accessible to mainstream American readers.

Figure 3 presents a world map marking the frequency of the countries mentioned in Keller's corpus. Keller's focus on America, the United Kingdom and other European countries may cast doubt on the credibility of her socialist views, but while Keller was affiliated with the Socialist Party, her activism focused on disability advocacy within elite Anglo–American circles. Indeed, Keller's political imaginary was confined to networks accessible through her celebrity status – American reformist circles, British intellectual salons, and European cultural institutions. This geographic lexical distribution thus constitutes quantitative evidence that her socialism operated within, rather than against, transnational bourgeois networks, which confined the authenticity and reach of her radicalism (Nielsen 2009).

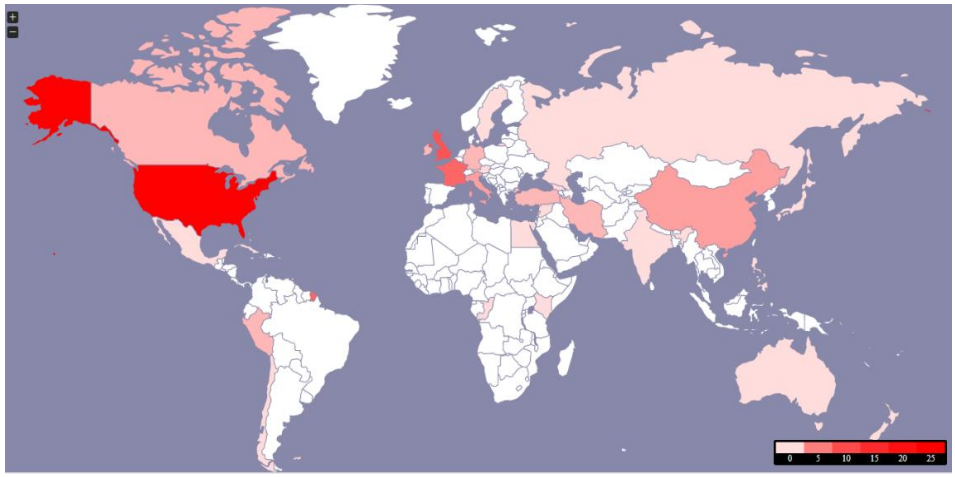

Figure 3. Map of countries most frequently mentioned in Keller's writings (Redness intensity signifies frequently mentioned states)

This perspective manifests itself when Keller specifies the social and international stances to the American context instead of linking the American stance or event at higher social and international levels. She, for instance, declares that "American women" instead of women in general can accomplish almost anything that they set their hearts on. Again, while stressing the role of women in preventing diseases and resisting ignorance, Keller ended her article with "I plead that the American woman may be the mother of a great race," (Keller 1907). Similarly, when she discussed the value of education, she started with statements like "education has been called the American passion." Keller also frequently associates her positive stances with American perspectives, rather than human or social perspective, e.g., "justice-loving American people," "I am for you because you represent the spirit of kindly consideration by every American toward all his

fellowmen" (Keller 2013). An excerpt displays a sample concordance of the countries mentioned in Keller's corpus (see Table 8).

Table 8. Sample concordance of the countries mentioned in Keller's corpus

His talk about world affairs was stimulating... he thought the working people of *Germany* might overturn Naziism and join Russia in a constructive effort for peace'
'I was relieved to hear an authoritative statement from Mr Menten that immediate war had been averted between *Germany* and *France*'
'It pleased him that I was probably going to *Japan* in April and might proceed from there to *China* with a message of encouragement for uncounted blind persons'
'I am more harsh in my attitude towards *Germany* than towards *Russia*... *Russia* is making wonderful progress under a benevolent if paternalistic government'
I have papers and magazines from *England*, *France*, *Germany* and *Austria* that I can read myself'
'Ethylene gas anesthesia and insulin were given to the world by scientists in the *United States* and *Canada* without thought of personal profit'
'He was in a position similar to that of advanced leaders in *Egypt*, *Turkey*, *Iran*, and *India* today who are breaking up a feudal regime'
'We had already visited the war-blinded in *England* and *France* and *Italy* and we were heartsick and tired'
'I am glad to join the People's Freedom Union and other friends of liberty in condemnation of the blockade of *Russia* by *Japan, Great Britain, France* and the *United States'*

5. Conclusion

This study aimed at exploring several debates over Keller's public image through a corpus analysis of a representative sample of her writings (1887-1955). Frequencies, keywords, concordances, and collocations offered a new reading of Keller's work as a writer and thinker. By integrating corpus stylistics and life-writing analysis, this study positions Keller not as a symbol of disability, but as an active author negotiating language, identity, and companionship. It also seems that Keller's socialist rhetoric is underwritten by a persistent American exceptionalism that elevates U.S. democratic institutions as universal benchmarks, while her geopolitical sympathies, extended to Soviet progress and anti-fascist critique. In some essays, she supports the structures of Anglo-American bourgeois internationalism.

Although corpus analysis of literary texts provides insights that may not emerge from qualitative readings alone, it also has limitations. First, word frequencies are not enough to form a solid argument without considering the sociocultural context in which the texts appeared. They rather provide a different type of evidence for supporting or refuting an argument. Second, the use of different statistical measures of the same linguistic phenomenon (e.g., collocations or keyness) may attain different results, i.e., assign dissimilar values for the same lexical units. Such limitations on genre imbalance (autobiographical works dominate), metadata inconsistencies (revised edition dating), and the necessity of contextualising frequencies within early-twentieth-century disability discourse may confound dissimilar collocational rankings. Therefore, we argue for the essentiality of considering both qualitative and quantitative pieces of evidence to support or

refute any argument over a literary figure. In other words, corpus tools generate textual patterns but only interpreted meaningfully within a replicable theoretical model for digital humanities approaches to marginalised voices.

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