



## Flowers for Algernon by Daniel Keyes Harcourt, New York, 2004

### Plot summary

Charlie Gordon is a mentally retarded 32 year old man who undergoes an operation to boost his intelligence. The operation was developed by Professor Nemur and Dr. Strauss and was performed successfully on a mouse named Algernon before Charlie had the operation. Charlie progresses rapidly, eventually becoming more intelligent than Nemur and Strauss. He struggles to reconcile his intelligence with his emotional immaturity as he realizes he has feelings for his former teacher Alice Kinnian and remembers

experiences from his childhood. He struggles particularly with panic when in intimate situations with women because of memories of his mother beating him for having erections. Nemur and Strauss take Algernon and Charlie to a scientific convention in Chicago where Charlie becomes frustrated with being treated like a lab animal. He takes Algernon and runs away from the convention. He finds his own apartment in New York and develops a relationship with Fay, his neighbor. He is able to have sex with her without the panic he experienced with Alice. Algernon starts behaving erratically and his intelligence begins to deteriorate. Charlie researches the phenomenon and discovers that the experiment is flawed and that his intelligence with deteriorate as Algernon's has. Charlie slowly regresses back to the same level of mental retardation as before the experiment.



### Organizational Patterns

The book is organized into 17 progress reports comprised of 88 journal dated from March 3 to November 18. Since Charlie begins the novel mentally retarded, gradually becomes a genius and then regresses into mental retardation again the novel's style is drastically different in the beginning and end than it is in the middle. Initially Charlie writes very simply, with many grammar/spelling problems and no punctuation. As the operation is successful, Charlie's writing becomes more elegant and academic. This process is reversed when Charlie's intelligence begins deteriorating. The initial and final progress reports have only one entry each, but the middle reports have several entries. Similarly, the entries at the beginning and end are as short as a few sentences, while those in the middle are several pages long.

A somewhat even division of the progress reports by length follows:

- Progress Reports 1–7
- Progress Reports 8–9
- Progress Reports 10–11
- Progress Report 12
- Progress Report 13
- Progress Reports 14–15
- Progress Report 16
- Progress Report 17

## Central Question

### **What makes someone a whole human being?**

Throughout the novel Charlie tries to assert himself as a complete human being. Dr. Nemur and Dr. Strauss often treat Charlie like they treat Algernon: as a scientific phenomenon that they created. Charlie resents this attitude that they created him because it implies that he did not exist as a human being before the experiment. Keyes addresses this question in his portrayal of the way people treat Charlie before the operation as well. The other workers at the bakery are cruel to Charlie and mock him, but do not feel they are doing anything wrong because he does not realize that they are making fun of him. They feel that because he is mentally retarded he is somehow sub-human.

In addition, this question is addressed by the struggle Charlie faces when his intellectual development far outstrips his emotional development. Before the operation Charlie is kind and warmhearted, but as he becomes more intelligent he becomes cold and arrogant and has a hard time connecting with other people. Charlie is unhappy and unfulfilled until he learns to develop both his mental and emotional intelligence.

## Themes



### **Moral implications of the use of technology**

In this novel, Charlie participates in a procedure that is supposed to be miraculous. Making him intelligent is expected to make his life exponentially better than it was before. However, even before Charlie starts to deteriorate his situation has many negative aspects. He realizes that his 'friends' at the bakery were actually mocking him and begins remembering horrible experiences from his childhood. He becomes so much smarter than

everyone around him that he has a hard time talking to people and is extremely isolated. This experiment that was supposed to improve his life leaves him just as alienated as he was when mentally retarded, just at the other end of the spectrum. Hilda, the nurse who cares for Charlie immediately after the operation, and Fanny at the bakery both suggest that the experiment is immoral. They liken Charlie's procedure to Adam and Eve partaking of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. The implication is that there are certain things that technology and science should not try to change or control. This theme is underscored by the fact that the experiment ultimately fails and Charlie deteriorates back to his initial state of mental retardation and leaves to go live at the Warren home because his months of intelligence permanently alienated him from his former life. However, at the end of the novel Charlie is grateful for the opportunities he had because of the experiment and retains some of the insights he gained, leaving the ending somewhat ambiguous.

### **The tension between emotions and intelligence**

As mentioned earlier, Charlie has a difficult time reconciling his rapid intellectual growth with his slower emotional progress. Nemur and Fay illustrate the incompatibility of emotion and intelligence. Nemur is entirely intellectual and is humorless and friendless. Fay is entirely emotional. She does not think through her decisions logically; she just acts in the way that will offer the most immediate amusement. Alice eventually helps Charlie realize that he does not have to choose between one or the other, but rather can be both intelligent and emotional. Only at this point is he able to have a fulfilling emotional and intellectual relationship with Alice.

### **Setting**

The story is set mainly in New York City, but there is little reference to the setting. One chapter takes place in Chicago. The time period is not specified. Charlie briefly mentions Times Square, but other than that there are few references to the setting. Overall, knowledge about the setting is not particularly important for understanding the story, as it is mainly about Charlie's internal struggles.

## Point of View

This story is told exclusively from Charlie's point of view, as the entire novel is comprised of his journal entries.

## Literary terms

### **Allusion**

As mentioned earlier, Charlie's situation is compared to the Biblical story of Adam and Eve.

### **Flashback**

Much of Charlie's knowledge about himself and his past comes to him through flashbacks or dreams he has. These flashbacks allow us to see what Charlie's childhood was like and gain further insight into him as a character as well as helping Charlie work through emotional issues caused when he was a child.

### **Symbols**

#### **Algernon**

Algernon functions as a symbol for Charlie in two major ways. First, Algernon has the operation before Charlie does and therefore is a reliable predictor of the process Charlie experiences. Algernon also is a symbol of the way Charlie is treated by the scientists. They often view or treat him like he is a non-human experiment like Algernon is. Charlie identifies with Algernon and is sad that he is caged and has to solve problems to get food. When Charlie runs away from the doctors in Chicago, he brings Algernon with him and tries to treat him humanely. He views himself and Algernon as being in same situation.



### **Tone**

The tone of this novel changes dramatically as Charlie's intelligence and attitude changes. He progresses from simple and kind to arrogant and cold to intelligent and understanding to terrified and lonely back to simple and kind.

## Affective Issues

## **Loneliness**

Charlie is different than the people around him throughout the book. Although his intelligence progresses from retardation to genius and then back, he is always intellectually distant from other people and unable to communicate and connect with them.

## **Bullying**

Charlie is taunted by other people because he is mentally retarded. There are several incidents in his childhood when he is bullied by other students, and even as an adult the other workers at the bakery play jokes on him and laugh at his expense. Charlie's situation is a good starting point for discussions about bullying, why it occurs and the negative consequences it can have on people.

## **Sexuality**

The novel is never graphic, but there are mentions of sex and sexual desire. Charlie's sexual development is an important part of his emotional development. Charlie essentially goes through puberty during the novel. As his intelligence grows he begins to find women attractive, have erections and wet dreams, and become nervous around Alice. However, his mother always punished him when he was young when he showed signs of arousal, so he initially has panic attacks when he is aroused. He is able to have sex with Fay by having a purely physical relationship with her, but has a much more fulfilling relationship with Alice because they connect both physically and emotionally.

## **Vocabulary**

Although Charlie's intelligence surpasses that of the neuroscientists with whom he works, his vocabulary never becomes inaccessible. His language, grammar and vocabulary do improve dramatically along with his intelligence. Several entries offer opportunities for teaching elements of good writing. For example, Charlie learns punctuation on April 6 and 7, but uses them incorrectly at first. Using passages like these as models for correcting punctuation or comparing the early entries with the middle entries could be a tool to teach the students how to express themselves well.

## **Background knowledge**

### **Psychology**

There is some discussion of neuroscience and psychology in the novel. Much of the scientific information is purely hypothetical and therefore not as valuable as background knowledge, but basic understanding of some of the psychology principles in the book will help students understand Charlie's mental state.

- **Word association** - Charlie is told to do word association by Dr. Strauss, his psychiatrist. Several times in the novel Charlie has flashbacks triggered by

word associations from dreams that he has. Explaining to students that these kind of word associations are thought to reveal a person's subconscious, including memories they may have repressed, will help them to understand these passages.

- **Memory repression** - many of the dreams and flashbacks Charlie has are triggered by events in his life that are somehow similar to incidents in the past. Understanding the theory that memories can be repressed and that events can trigger those repressed memories is vital to students understanding the significance of these flashbacks. They also need to understand that these flashbacks and dreams are actual events that happened in his past and not just nightmares.
- **Rorschach tests** - Charlie is shown Rorschach tests a few different times in the novel. These tests are cards with inkblots on them. The different images that people see in the inkblots reveal different aspects of their mental state.

## Implications for Students of Diversity

### **Mental Retardation**

Charlie's experiences with being mentally retarded and being picked on will resonate with students who have similar challenges. He struggles to feel accepted by others and feels that if he just learns to read or somehow becomes smarter he will have friends. His struggle to fit in will relate to students who face similar situations, whether they are different because of race, religion, socioeconomic status or intellectual capacity. Charlie's story is also a good tool for teaching those who are in the majority the damage that can occur from intolerance.

### **Gender Issues**

Charlie's developing sexuality presents some issues unique to adolescent boys (such as wet dreams and erections) but there are not really any major gender-related issues.

### **Research Issues/Project Ideas**

- **Dream interpretation:** Some of Charlie's dreams are flashbacks of memories, but some of them are more abstract. For example, he has a recurring dream about the three blind mice song when he gets aroused. This dream represents the traumatic experience of his mom threatening to cut off his penis and demanding that he leave the house. After a discussion of how Charlie's dream reflects his experiences and feelings, students can keep a dream diary and see if they can find any connections to their real life in their dreams. Alternately, they could write a fictional dream in which some memory or emotion is represented symbolically.
- **Psychology:** There are many research topics related to psychology in *Flowers for Algernon*. Much of the science is fictional and/or too difficult

to understand, but a lot of the psychology is quite accessible. Charlie does Rorschach tests and word associations in the novel, and both of those topics would be interesting for students to research or try on your own. Students could also take a series of personality tests and write about how accurate they feel these tests are.

- Treatment of Mentally Disabled: This novel was written in the 60s, when it was more common to put individuals who are mentally disabled in homes like the Warren Home. Students could research the changes in attitudes and treatment of individuals with mental disabilities. Charlie touches on some of these changes in his comments that the correct term used to be “retarded”, but now is “exceptional” but that the term will change again as soon as “exceptional” starts to be an insult.

## Enrichment Resources

- Daniel Keyes originally wrote a short story version of *Flowers for Algernon*. (Originally published in the April 4, 1959, issue of The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction.) It is slightly different than the novel, but could be used as a comparison.
- Ralph Nelson’s 1968 film version of the novel called *Charly* (rated PG).
- Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* also deals with the issue of a mentally retarded adult man.
- *What It’s Like to Be Me* by Helen Exley is a picture book with illustrations and statements by children with disabilities. They address some of the same fundamental issues the Charlie wrestles with in *Flowers for Algernon*.