

Intelligence versus happiness in flowers for algernon by daniel keyes



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Flowers For Algernon is a novel written in a series of progress reports from protagonist Charlie Gordan. From the beginning author Daniel Keyes makes it quite clear that Charlie suffers from mental disability. Barely able to read and write, Charlie is forced to make a decision that will impact his life forever. Scientists from Beekman University, Harold Strauss and Prof. Nemur needed a volunteer to test experimental science in intelligence enhancement. Charlie was specifically selected from “The teaching centre for retarded adults” after being recommended from his long time teacher Alice Kinnian. Charlie, was eager to get his surgery and become smart, but first they needed permission from someone in his family, Charlie still unable to recall memories, does not remember where his family is, or if he even has any still alive. Norma Gordon, Charlie’s sister was found by the University staff and granted permission to perform the surgery. Although Charlie did not have the full understanding of what a friend is, once he got to the lab he made an unlikely friend.

‘I think I’ll be friends with Algernon’. Algernon, the white lab mouse who has learned to solve complex mazes, escape almost any cage, and display emotions through his actions. This is a sign of hope for both the doctors and Charlie, as this is the first time the surgery has stuck, and the intelligence gained from it has not dissipated rapidly. Let’s face it, he lives in a cage and runs through mazes for food. Most importantly, Algernon couldn’t exactly give his permission for a mind-altering surgery. As a helpless animal, he’s totally at the mercy of the scientists. And he’s not the only one. Charlie, too, has barely any ability to tell Strauss and Nemur no, let alone give his consent for all the things they do to him in the name of science. As Algernon and

Charlie experience a similar task and a similar testing, Algernon's is a foreshadowing of Charlie's future. At the point when Algernon starts to lose his intelligence, it is a chilling sign that Charlie's very own psychological additions will start to disappear as well. Algernon additionally symbolizes Charlie's status as a subject of the researchers, secured and confined, compelled to go through all testing at the researchers' desire. Charlie relates to this mouse, as he understands both are simply lab investigations to the researchers examining them. Although he grieves when Algernon passes, a special request is made the flowers be put on his grave, symbolizing mourning and memories with him.

Within the first 4 months of the surgery, Charlie's IQ has jumped over 50 points, and is only increasing faster the higher it gets. Dr. Strauss and Prof. Nemur have Charlie consistently learning, and Charlie's motivation has not declined. In the first month of the surgery Charlie was having a hard time sleeping, the doctors realized Charlie's ability to learn is similar to that of a baby, soaking in the information, so they play complex speech of different regions of the world and Charlie quickly becomes multi-lingual. However with this intelligence, Charlie starts to have memories of his tragic childhood home life, and also realizes that his whole life he thought he had friends, but they were really just making fun of his retardation. " People have always spoken and acted as if I were not there, as if they never cared what I overheard". Recalling past memories from the Bakery, Charlie recounts specific times his friends would try to teach him new things and what was not obvious before, is now, they weren't teaching Charlie, they were making fun of his lack of understanding for their own enjoyment. Now Charlie has

come to the realization that he has not had the friends he thought he had, but this just motivates him more to prove everyone wrong, and his family which he is slowly starting to have memories of. “ Dont look at your sister in a sexual way! That’s wrong! Get him out of the house now!” was Charlie’s first memories of his mother’s words. Charlie remembers for the first time, he describes it as an out of body experience, as if two Charlie’s were there and he was stuck in the background watching. His mother beats him, and young Charlie dirties his pants, further enraging his mother, causing her to get a belt, but before he gets beaten, he awakens. Now that Charlie’s IQ has risen and his intelligence is rapidly increasing, he is starting to experience emotions he’s never felt before, rage, hate, love, confusion, Charlie is starting to understand his troubled past and exclusion he felt from his parents.

Dr. Strauss and Prof Nemur congratulate Charlie on his IQ surpassing 100, and explain to him his is the fastest learning human ever. Charlie now is becoming just as smart as these doctors, and begins questioning the way they are treating him. “ It may sound like ingratitude, but that is one of the things that I resent at the University – the attitude that I am a guinea pig, or the constant references to having made me what I am, how can I make them understand they did not create me. Charlie starts to question his own humanity, and if the doctors understand he is human too, before and after the surgery. As Charlie’s intelligence continues to increase, his faint memories become more prominent, and he is starting to realize that his previous ignorance caused him less stress and anxiety then now. Meanwhile Dr. Strauss and prof. Nemur inform Charlie of the press conference of

psychological science taking place in Chicago, and is excited to attend. It is at this point, when the press conference starts when the world is opened up, Charlie realizes how people view him once the conference starts. “ We who have works on this project at Beekman University have the satisfaction of knowing we have taken one of nature’s mistakes and by our new techniques created a superior human being” Prof, Nemur continues to explain how Charlie was not a part of society before the surgery, and had no contact with the present to live a normal life. These statements provoked Charlie, from a wandering clueless man, to having all of this stress placed upon him; it took everything in Charlie to not defend himself. “ I’m a human being, a person- with parents and memories and a history – and I was before you ever wheeled me into that operating room!” thought Charlie. The permanence of the surgery unknown, Charlie knew that the doctor’s conclusions had been premature, for both Algernon and himself. “ Like Algernon, I found myself behind the mesh of the cage they had built around me.” From this point onward, Charlie was determined to get out of there, with Algernon, who he finds to be his only trusting friend nowadays. Sneakily, Charlie unlatched Algernon’s cage, and as he escaped chaos ensued in the conference. Algernon’s intelligence, along with Charlie’s helped them escape as everyone frantically tried to find them, as Prof Nemur said, if we do not find him, our whole experiment is in danger. Through the commotion Charlie had an epiphany. Through his multi-linguistics, Charlie has read up on advancing Hindu, Arabic research, he found a tragic flaw in the doctor’s research, and knows that not everything is as he hoped, and his intelligence may be dissipating faster than anticipated. “ First I’ve got to see my parents. As soon as I can. I may not have all the time I thought I had.”

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When Charlie reunites with his parents, he knows that things are not as they used to be, or as his brief memories serve him. Charlie struggles with the fact his parents may not remember who he is, or care enough to get to know him, but he is determined to discover his past, and find out who he really was before the surgery. After visiting his father at his barber shop, and his mother with his sister, he understands now that neither of them were ever concerned with him, simply overwhelmed with what others thought and portraying the perfect family to anyone overlooking. It is at this point when Charlie starts to question what his happiness truly means, and he realizes that his rapidly increasing intelligence has not made him happier, except to unfold all the troubles and stress that takes place in his life, along with others.

To support the theme that intelligence doesn't bring happiness, there are many clues throughout the novel that hint to Charlie's experiences. Charlie discovers that the friends he always thought he had regularly exploited him before the surgery. This makes Charlie become suspicious of the general population around him. He understands now that his co-workers were simply using him to continue to make jokes. Likewise, he was fired from the bakery that he cherished so much, since his new knowledge made the laborers around him feel sub-par compared to Charlie. This sends him into a short depression. He had no one to identify with in light of the fact that now, Charlie's knowledge has just surpassed that of the scientist testing him. He had nobody to relate to because at this point, Charlie's intelligence has already exceeded that of his teacher and the doctors. Before Charlie became smart, even the simplest experiences in life were good enough for him. As a

genius, none of those things mattered to him. His mind was more complex, he needed more. For Charlie, happiness is determined both by his intelligence level but also his level of human connection.

In his brief time as a “ normal” person, Charlie discovers great pain, both in and of himself but he also discovers great joy. When he is finally able to make love to Alice, he describes it as a tremendous experience. He sees “ how important physical love was, how necessary it was for us to be in each other’s arms, giving and taking. The universe was exploding... As when men to keep from being swept overboard in the storm clutch at each other’s hands to resist being torn apart, so our bodies fused a link in the human chain that kept us from being swept into nothing”. Even after Charlie has regressed, he still remembers the happiness he experienced during his time with his friends and loved ones; he asks people not to feel bad for him, for he says: “ I’m glad I found out all about my family and me... now I know I had a family and I was a person just like everyone”. Keyes demonstrates all of this in two important ways. Contradictory to my thesis, he shows how intelligence can be bliss. As Charlie’s intelligence was rapidly increasing, he threw himself into his research, and he thoroughly enjoyed learning while he could. Charlie admits his thirst to learn is unquenchable. Keyes does not completely refuse the idea that ignorance is bliss; he shows that Charlie is happiest when disabled, and consistently upset and distraught when intelligent. The smarter Charlie got, the less happy he got, but he did not let that stop him from trying to help others.

Not only did Charlie go through major changes in his intelligence levels, he also experiences new feelings and sensations in his romantic life and the <https://assignbuster.com/intelligence-versus-happiness-in-flowers-for-algernon-by-daniel-keyes/>

relationships he develops. From the beginning of the novel, Charlie is completely ignorant to females, and his mother Rose Gordon would beat him any time he got an erection or had sexual thoughts. Keyes most significant point about affection and sexuality is Freudian in nature, human sexuality starts with youth experience. After Charlie Gordon turns into a genius, he's overwhelmed by mental trips of his youth self, the broken memories he always experiences, a disguised depiction of his sexual weaknesses. As a child, Charlie's mom would punish and beat him for demonstrating any enthusiasm for ladies. " She comes toward him, screaming that he is a bad boy, and Charlie runs to his father for help". This infers that Charlie's youth encounters give him a changeless attitude for engaging in sexual relations with ladies, brought about by an obsession with a solid, oppressive mother figure. Since he's as yet terrified of his mom's disciplines, Charlie can't perform explicitly with the ladies he meets in the wake of turning into a genius. Charlie does struggle with relationships, however the relationships he had formed previous to his surgery hadn't been what he thought. Now able to understand emotions and recall memories, he realizes that his friends would bully him regardless of his state, before or after the surgery.

Whilst Charlie worked at the bakery, before his surgery, the other workers would constantly tease his inability to learn all while he was too ignorant to know what they were doing. The same can be said for Dr. Strauss and Prof Nemur, as once Charlies increase of intelligence starts to surpass their own. When video is shown of Charlie before the surgery, struggling to communicate or perform tests, everyone laughs. When Charlie tries to defend himself, now finally capable too himself, he gets shunned from the

group. Keyes suggests that humans have a tendency to control the people weaker, and fear the people who are stronger. Why do bullies bully?

Charlie quickly learned once his intelligence increased, that all the time he thought he had friends it wasn't as it appeared. It is sometimes hard to understand why bullies bully. In earlier life, bullying often takes place because the bully believes it will make them more popular or respected. Once they realize they can get away with it, and they start getting more attention and respect for their harmful actions, it often becomes an addictive behavior. It may not be only physical, often times verbal bullying can go unnoticed because of how quick and easy it is. However as life continues and people get older, the motives behind bullying change slightly. Bullies fear the people in charge, and will take any advantage they can to put someone down or lower their social status if possible. Whether it's over an insecurity, or the bully himself has had a troubled childhood, a common form of bullying is exclusion. Charlie experiences both types of this bullying. Before his intelligence, his peers would make fun of him, since to his low level of intelligence he could not defend himself or take action, in fact he did not even understand that he was being bullied in the first place. Later on, once Charlie's intelligence has surpassed the doctors and everyone he knew, he experienced the exclusion and unwantedness his peers felt. Charlie was not understood, and at every point in his life he was made fun of for being better or worse.

The novel *Flowers for Algernon* creates the line of intelligence versus happiness. Through Charlie's triumphs and tribulations, Keyes makes it clear that Charlie's rapid increase in intelligence did not attribute to an overall

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happiness. The definition of intelligence is: the ability to acquire and apply knowledge skills. Going past this definition, Keyes proves that as your intelligence increases so does your awareness to the world around you, and the constant pressures someone can face at any moment in their life. Charlie proves that ignorance is bliss, and the value of human life is much more than being just intelligent, relationships, family, and overall happiness in day to day living is the most important thing.