

How can an audience identify with charlie gordon's desire to be 'smart'? essay



Charlie Gordon is a mentally disabled man with an IQ of only 68.

He works as a cleaner in a factory and his greatest desire is to be 'smart'. He is chosen to undergo a surgical operation to triple his base intelligence, which, if successful, will hugely alter his life. 'Flowers for Algernon' follows the story of how his life changes. Charlie's role changes throughout the text greatly. At the beginning of the play, Charlie is kind-hearted, trusting and eager to please, although incredibly naive.

He has a fierce motivation to educate himself in his desire to be 'smart'. His speech is generally slow and hesitant with an occasional stutter, but this disappears entirely after his surgery. Charlie leads a simple life, working as a cleaner in a factory. He is a student at the night school attending Miss Kinnian's lessons to help him 'be smart'.

Charlie clearly wants to be more intelligent. He recognises that he is slow and that 'being smart' is something desirable. He likes Miss Kinnian 'because she is a very smart teacher' and he wants to be able 'to read better and spell the words good and know lots of things and be like other people'. He assumes that being more intelligent will be better. Charlie's workmates at the factory patronise him, mock him and humiliate him.

They laugh at his slowness ('doing a Charlie Gordon'), make jokes about him that he cannot understand and use him to provide a cheap laugh at social functions. After Charlie's operation they change their attitude towards him.

When Charlie suggests a new way of lining up the machines on the production line, saving thousands of pounds a year in labour and bringing about increased production, he is given a fifty pound bonus by Mr Donnegan,

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the factory owner. This new intelligence displayed by Charlie threatens his workmates and they petition to remove him. They can no longer mock Charlie and entertain themselves through their feelings of superiority over him, and his insights into greater efficiency mean that their secure jobs might be at risk.

Charlie would never have known how stupid he was if he didn't have the operation. He doesn't realise what other people think of him. Before the operation, he is naïve and gullible because of his lack of intelligence and sense. Morals mean more to Charlie than the other characters.

He cares about Algernon as he would a person and sees him as a friend. He is happy when he beats Algernon in the maze, but is also sad for the mouse because he lost, and Charlie knows Algernon must 'feel really bad... after winning all this time.' Charlie has no real idea about friendship.

He thinks that Bert is his friend after only meeting him once. The people that Charlie thinks are his friends are really only making fun of him. Charlie is initially unaware of the prejudice that other people have towards people like him of less intelligence and the unkind things that they do or say. After his operation, Charlie 'wakes up' to a world that is far more hostile and imperfect than he could have realised before the operation. His emotions change and the way he reacts to people around him.

He sees people differently, as he says to a professor at the conference, 'No one I've ever known is what he appears to be on the surface.' He grows to love Miss Kinnian as he sees her as the woman that she is, rather than just his teacher. Charlie's view on life changes from being naïve to more

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experienced. He becomes cynical about the world and finally understands why people made fun of him. Charlie even becomes hypocritical as he starts to realise that he, too, makes fun of people less intelligent than him. When he joins in the laughter at the café½ when he sees the slow-witted boy drop the plates, Charlie is horrified at himself: ‘ I was laughing at him.

Just like all those others... it took that simple-minded boy to make me see the truth’. Charlie begins to question whether his initial feelings about intelligence have changed.

Could it be that he was happier when he was less intelligent, all along? The operation possibly makes Charlie ‘ too intelligent’. He grows angry and afraid and feels let down by everyone else because nobody understands his complex language. He ‘ overtakes’ the scientists’ knowledge and at his peak of intelligence, Charlie dismisses a lot of what Strauss and Nemur say, without realising that he is making them feel inferior. Charlie bitterly comments to the two doctors, ‘ Charlie and Algernon’, ‘ Algernon and Charlie’ – two interchangeable experimental animals. We should be treated alike.’ He feels like a lab-test subject because no one else can relate to him.

Charlie seems more isolated and emotionally starved at the end of the play than he was at the beginning. Before the operation, at least people talked to Charlie at the factory and he felt quite happy. Later, his intelligence makes him become more lonely, ‘ I can’t communicate with anyone very much, now’, which juxtaposes his initial position. Before he was too dumb to communicate with people properly; after his operation he’s too clever to communicate because he uses words that ‘ normal people’ don’t understand.

At the start Charlie had no pride. When he is intelligent he becomes proud, but then he is ashamed that he will lose that pride during his regression and as his powers decline, he desperately tries to cling on to what he had.

Charlie realises that like Algernon, he too, will begin to regress. When Charlie's stutter returns this marks the beginning of his regression, and a horrible moment of realisation for what is going to happen to him. At the end, Charlie feels that he needs to go somewhere where no-one knows him.

The irony of his situation is shown in one of his last lines: 'It's easy to make friends if you let people laugh at you'. Strauss and Nemur have different roles. Strauss is the neurosurgeon who performs the operation on Charlie. Right from the beginning he decided that Charlie was the right candidate for the program and overruled Nemur's disapproval.

Strauss and Charlie work most closely. Unlike Nemur, Strauss treats Charlie more like a human being and cares for him as a person rather than a test subject. Although, when Charlie is told by the doctors that the effects may not be permanent Charlie does not understand, and maybe it was an error of the doctors for not explaining this to him properly. Strauss tries hard to be supportive of Charlie and kind towards him in a non-patronising way.

He asks Charlie if he is scared and tries to reassure him about uncertainties. At the start, because Strauss is nice to him, Charlie thinks he is his friend. He feels the opposite about Nemur as he is colder and less friendly towards Charlie when they first meet. He is obviously more humanitarian than Nemur, which is odd because Nemur is the trained psychologist, and so

theoretically, he should know better than to treat Charlie the way he does. At the end, Strauss is working far behind Charlie.

He is shocked when Charlie produces a full report of 'The Algernon-Gordon Experiment' after only five days' work. Dr Nemur is the leading psychologist and experimental theoretician who feels his work has never received the recognition it deserves. He is approaching sixty years of age, and realises that The Charlie Gordon experiment may be his last chance to make a name for himself and wants everything to be perfect. This is why at first he does not want to carry out the operation on Charlie, commenting that he feels Charlie is 'not the right candidate'. But despite his initial feelings, he wants to publish the report straight away so that Charlie cannot take any of his 'glory' away from him.

To Nemur, Charlie is just a test result and Charlie senses this. He doesn't like Nemur from the beginning as he says to Miss Kinnian, 'If he knows how I think, then he knows I don't like him either'. Nemur doesn't care about Charlie's feelings and talks down to him until Charlie becomes too clever and makes Strauss and Nemur feel inferior. He admits that Nemur is a 'genius' but then puts him down by saying he's 'shackled by self doubt'.

In the end Nemur may be kinder than Strauss because he knows what will happen to Charlie – he knows he'll gain so much intelligence and won't know what to do with it, as he says before the operation, 'I simply don't think he'll be able to cope with it'. The doctors do not provide Charlie with enough information for him to make an informed decision about whether or not he wants the operation. He is told that the operation might not be a success and

that the effects might not last, but the explanations are played down and Charlie only hears what he wants to hear. The doctors do not go to great lengths to make him understand what problems might occur giving the impression that they do not want him to understand fully. Miss Kinnian is Charlie's teacher at the night school and a vital character in the story.

She has a massive influence over Charlie in his school life and social life (the intelligent Charlie falls in love with her), and is his inspiration and idol. She provides a positive role model for Charlie and encourages him to do lots of different things. She is a supportive person and takes people's feelings into consideration. Miss Kinnian wants the best for her students and she offers Charlie friendship, trying to cushion the experiences that he will undergo as his intelligence and awareness improve: ' You shouldn't feel bad if you find out that some people aren't as nice as you think'. She recommends Charlie for the operation and encourages him to have it because she thinks it will give Charlie some degree of ' normality', which he has never experienced before. Miss Kinnian is there for him during the operation and reassures him: ' Don't be scared.

.. Dr Strauss is a very good surgeon. You'll be in good hands' but she never discusses details of the operation to Charlie. When she says to him, ' I think you're going to show them all', she isn't sure if she's doing the right thing.

Maybe, unaware of what she was doing, Miss Kinnian took advantage of Charlie by putting his name forward for the operation without discussing risks and giving Charlie more details -maybe she should have been more honest. She should have explained to Charlie about what permanent means,

so that he fully understood what he was agreeing to. Charlie thinks that Miss Kinnian is his friend and he trusts what she says so it doesn't take much convincing for him to agree to have the operation. Despite her naivety, Miss Kinnian values Charlie for the person that he is and is not patronising or puts Charlie down for being less intelligent. Her training as a teacher of adults with learning difficulties enables her to understand Charlie's difficulties and frustrations. Understandably, she is keen that he should be allowed access to a world previously closed to him: '.

.. Each step will open new worlds that you never even knew existed'. Miss Kinnian changes as Charlie's intelligence increases. She feels uneasy at Charlie's progress and how much he changes. ' I'm sorry.

Forgive me.' She's surprised of his intelligence changing so quickly and possibly feels threatened: ' You're already a better reader than I am. You'll soon be leaving me behind.' But she is sensitive enough to look to the future as Charlie progresses: ' I just hope I wasn't wrong, advising you to go into this in the first place', eventually sensing his isolation: unable to relate to people and with the fear that the regression will soon happen to him.

This could also be interpreted as the realisation that maybe she's done the wrong thing by encouraging him to have the operation. Society believes that people should act in a particular way and that everyone is judged by intelligence. Our society only rewards ' smart' people and so Charlie is willing to do anything to become smart. Our culture only seems to value academic intelligence; it does not value other intelligence's -examinations are everything. Perhaps we value tests more than we value people? Research is

a vital part of modern society and scientists want to find something to help other people. Charlie realises the importance of research to help less intelligent people after he sees the boy drop the plates in the café^{1/2}.

Also, a patient's consent must be obtained before any procedure is carried out, which is uncomplicated if the mental state and intelligence of the patient are stable. Obviously, with Charlie this is not the case, as he is under the mental age to be responsible for making a decision such as this. Charlie, himself, is treated like a lab 'animal', of which many people in our society are strongly against. Dramatic irony is used in *Flowers for Algernon* for Charlie's position at the beginning of the play- everyone else knows what is going to happen to him. He is the only one who does not understand what is going to happen and how it will affect him.

Also, when Charlie has to find his way through the maze and Algernon beats him, he does not know that Algernon has had the operation. There is less dramatic irony after Charlie has the operation, because he is then far more intelligent and aware of his surroundings. Sound effects are used to show the effect the operation has had on the tone of Charlie's voice; at the beginning he has an occasional stutter, which then disappears after the operation where he speaks fluently and confidently, later reappearing towards his regression. Because it is a radio play scene changes are shown by different sounds. The sound sets the tone of each scene.

Muffled sounds are used for people speaking behind a closed door, a prime example would be the argument between Nemur and Strauss. Sound effects are vital in the scene when Charlie laughs at the slow-witted boy in the

restaurant breaking all the plates – this is crucial as it shows Charlie realising that now he is just as prejudice towards less intelligent people as everybody else is. Charlie's desire to be 'smart' is expressed clearly throughout the text at all stages of his development. At the beginning he is eager to become more intelligent, but then with his new intelligence, learns that things such as moral values and friendship are more important for a happy life.