Flowers for Algernon Study Guide

Flowers for Algernon by Daniel Keyes

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Introduction

Originally published as a short story in 1958, *Flowers for Algernon* appeared as a full-length novel in 1966 and has remained a critical and popular success. The novel is told as a series of "Progress Reports" written by Charlie Gordon, a thirty-two-year-old man whose Intelligence Quotient (IQ) of 68 is tripled by an experimental surgical procedure. Unfortunately, the effects of the operation wear off after several months, and at the end of the novel Charlie is once more of subnormal intelligence. Although originally published as a work of science fiction-the short story won the World Science Fiction Convention's Hugo Award and the novel won the Nebula Award of the Science Fiction Writers of America-Daniel Keyes's story has achieved wide popularity outside the science fiction field. Much of the novel's power comes from Keyes's remarkable use of first-person point of view, as Charlie's entries move from semi-literacy to complex sophistication and back to semi-literacy. And the character of Charlie Gordon is a memorable portrait of alienation, of an individual who is at odds with his society and who struggles to have satisfactory relationships with others. The novel gained additional fame when its 1968 film version, *Charly,* earned Cliff Robertson an Academy Award as Best Actor for his portrayal of Charlie Gordon. Although some critics have found portions of the novel overly predictable or sentimental, Keyes's most famous work has continued to enjoy great popularity. Over thirty years after publication, *Flowers for Algernon* is still regarded with both respect and affection by readers within both the science fiction community and the public at large.

Author Biography

Daniel Keyes was born in Brooklyn, New York, on August 9, 1927. He was educated at Brooklyn College, where he received an A.B. degree in 1950. After graduation, Keyes worked briefly as an associate editor for the magazine *Marvel Science Fiction* while pursuing his own writing career; he later taught high school English in Brooklyn. In 1952 he married Aurea Georgina Vazquez, with whom he had three children. Keyes returned to Brooklyn College, received an A.M. degree in 1961, and went on to teach English on the university level, first at Wayne State University in Detroit. Michigan, and then at Ohio University, where in the 1970s he became Professor of English and director of the university's creative writing center.

Keyes was still teaching high school English when he first published the work that would make his reputation. The original short story version of "Flowers for Algernon" appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* in 1959. After the story won the Hugo Award for best science fiction story of the year and was adapted as a television drama, Keyes expanded the story into a novel, published in 1966. The novel won the Nebula Award of the Science Fiction Writers of America (tying with Samuel R. Delany's *Babel-17)* and was filmed in 1968 as *Charly.* The film was a notable success, earning Cliff Robertson an Academy Award as Best Actor for his portrayal of Charlie Gordon.

Although none of Keyes' other work has achieved the popular and critical success of *Flowers for Algernon,* he has continued to write while pursuing a full-time career in English academics. He published two other novels, *The Touch* (1968) and *The Fifth Sally* (1980), and the nonfiction works *The Minds of Billy Milligan* (1981) and *Unveiling Claudia:* A *True Story of a Serial Murder* (1986). Both *The Minds of Billy Milligan* and *The Fifth Sally* share with *Flowers for Algernon* a concern with extraordinary psychological states, as both books examine the phenomenon of multiple personalities. Indeed, Keyes was able to write his book on Billy Milligan-the first person in the United States ever acquitted of a major felony on the grounds of multiple personalities-only after several of Milligan's selves read *Flowers for Algernon* and agreed to work with the author.

Now retired from Ohio University and living in Boca Raton, Florida, Keyes has recently completed a new novel and seen his work attain tremendous popularity in Japan. *Daniel Keyes Collected Stories* (1993) and *The Daniel Keyes Reader* (1994), and the sequel to *The Minds of Billy Milligan, The Milligan Wars* (1993), have all been published in Japan, with *The Milligan Wars* appearing in a U.S. edition in 1996.

Plot Summary

Part I-Charlie Becomes a Genius

Flowers for Algernon is told as a series of "Progress Reports" written by Charlie Gordon, a thirty-two-year-old man with an IQ of 68. As Keyes's novel opens, Charlie has volunteered to he the subject of an experimental surgical procedure which would more than triple his IQ. Although Charlie is of subnormal intelligence, he is unusually motivated, taking night school classes at the Beekman University Center for Retarded Adults. At first, he is afraid he won't be chosen for the project. He doesn't understand what to do when he is asked to tell what he sees in inkblots, and when he traces through a diagram of a maze in competition with Algernon, a mouse who is running an actual maze, Algernon always wins. Nonetheless, Charlie is chosen by the scientists in charge of the project, Professor Nemur, the psychologist who developed the technique, and Dr. Strauss, the neurosurgeon who performs the actual operation.

After the surgery, Charlie returns to his job as a janitor at Donner's Bakery, where nobody is aware of his operation. The sad state of Charlie's life prior to the surgery is made clear when Joe Carp and Frank Reilly, whom Charlie regards as His friends, take him out to a bar, get him drunk, make fun of him, and leave him to find his way home.

As time passes, however, it becomes obvious that Charlie is getting smarter. At the bakery, he successfully operates a complicated machine that mixes baking dough. His performances on the psychological tests improve, and he finally beats Algernon at running the maze-a significant development, as the mouse has had its intelligence raised by the same surgical procedure that Charlie underwent. And his Progress Reports are more sophisticated and articulate than before.

As Charlie's IQ increases, so does his awareness of himself and others. Now, when his "friends" make fun of him, he understands their true motivations. He steadily advances at work, but takes no satisfaction from it because the other employees resent him. Eventually, his coworkers at the bakery are so unnerved by his unexplained changes that they sign a petition demanding that he be fired. The only one who doesn't, an old woman named Fanny Birden, nonetheless thinks Charlie's condition "ain't right" and wishes he could return to "the good simple man" he had been.

Charlie also realizes that he has fallen in love with Alice Kinnian, the night school teacher who originally recommended him for the operation. Despite the gentleness of her rejection, Charlie is terribly upset, as he is when he catches Gimpy, the one person at the bakery who had been kind to him, stealing. Charlie is becoming aware that factual knowledge and intellectual ability may not prepare a person to deal with all of life's problems.

Part II-Charlie as a Genius

As Charlie tries to cram a lifetime of intellectual and emotional development into a period of months, he also increases his self-awareness by recovering lost memories, a process triggered by sleep-learning devices and continued through His ongoing psychotherapy sessions with Dr. Strauss. Through a series of flashbacks, we learn the agonizing details of Charlie's early life. Charlie's father, Matt, tried to do the best he could for his son. But Charlie's mother, Rose, denied that there was anything "wrong" with him and beat him when he was unable to learn like other children. However, when Charlie's sister Norma was born with normal intelligence, Rose turned against Charlie and sought to "protect" Norma from him, reacting with particular violence to anything he did that showed his developing sexuality. Finally, after an hysterical outburst in which Rose threatened to kill Charlie, Matt took Charlie to live with his uncle Herman. When Herman died several years later, Rose tried to have Charlie committed to the Warren State Home and Training School, an institution for the mentally handicapped, but Charlie avoided this when the owner of Donner's Bakery, a lifelong friend of his uncle Herman, offered him a job. The "new" Charlie now realizes that both his extraordinary motivation to learn and his confused responses to women are rooted in how he was treated by his mother.

As Charlie's IQ surges to nearly triple its original level, his relationship with Alice deepens, but when she is finally able to return his feelings, his childhood traumas leave him unable to make love to her. More importantly, the gap between their respective IQs makes it harder and harder for them to communicate, a problem the genius Charlie now has with almost everyone. In particular, he has come to regard Nemur and Strauss, who previously seemed unapproachable geniuses, as narrowly focused specialists more interested in acquiring fame and power than they are in increasing knowledge and helping others. When Nemur and Strauss take Charlie and Algernon to a psychologists' conference in Chicago to announce the success of their procedure, Charlie is outraged by their treating him like an object on display rather than as a human being. He is also disturbed by what appears to be an error in Nemur's analysis of the "waiting period" after the operation. Disgusted, Charlie deliberately lets Algernon loose in the conference room While the others are frantically trying to recover the mouse, Charlie slips Algernon in his pocket, leaves the conference, and returns to New York, where he rents an apartment and drops out of sight.

Now completely on his own, Charlie devotes himself to reading, thinking, and recovering his memories. During this time he forms a relationship with Fay Lillman, a painter who lives down the hall. Charlie is attracted to Fay's free spirit and lack of inhibitions, but, as with Alice, he is unable to have a sexual relationship with her. His sense of isolation increases. Yearning for meaningful contact with others, he walks the streets of New York feeling an "unbearable hunger" for human contact He even goes to visit his father, who left his mother several years earlier. His father fails to recognize him, and Charlie cannot bring himself to reveal his identity. A few days later, while dining alone in a restaurant, Charlie witnesses a young man drop a stack of dishes:

When the owner came to see what the excitement was about, the boy cowered-threw up his hands as if to ward off a blow

"All right! All right, you dope," shouted the man, "don't Just stand there! Get the broom and sweep up that mess. A broom. a broom' you idiot! It's in the kitchen. Sweep up all the pieces."

When the boy saw that he was not going to be punished, his frightened expression disappeared, and he smiled and hummed as he came back with the broom. A few of the rowdier customers kept up the remarks, amusing themselves at his expense.

"Here, sonny, over here There's a nice piece behind you.. "

"C'mon, do it again.."

"He's not so dumb. It's easier to break 'em than to wash 'em.. "

As the boy's vacant eyes moved across the crowd of amused onlookers, he slowly mirrored their smiles and finally broke into an uncertain gnu at the Joke which he did not understand.

I felt sick inside as I looked at His dull, vacuous smile, the wide, bright eyes of a child, uncertain but eager to please, and I realized what I had recognized in him. They were laughing at him because he was retarded.

And at first I had been amused along with the rest.

Suddenly, I was furious at myself and all those who were smirking at him I wanted to pick up the dishes and throw them. I wanted to smash their laughing faces. I Jumped up and shouted. "Shut up! Leave him alone! He can't understand He can't help what he is... but for God's sake, have some respect! *He's a human being!"*

The incident makes Charlie decide to return to Beekman University and work on his own to perfect Nemur and Strauss's procedure so that it might help others like himself.

After returning to the University, Charlie renews his relationship with Alice but is still unable to make love to her. He turns back to Fay, whom he does not truly love but with whom he is able, finally, to have a sexual relationship. Eventually, though, Charlie becomes so immersed in his research that he moves into the lab and breaks off with Fay, who resents the time he devotes to his work-and who also has never known the truth about Charlie. Time is of the essence, as Algernon is beginning to show signs of instability and decline. Charlie works feverishly to determine if the effects of his operation will last, driven both by his fear of reverting to his former self and his desire to find any information at all that might help other mentally handicapped people. He also begins to achieve a more mature insight into his own nature and that of other people. In a confrontation with Nemur, Charlie declares that "intelligence and education that hasn't been tempered by human affection isn't worth a damn."

Part III-Charlie Loses His Genius

Finally, Charlie's completes his research. In a letter to Nemur, he announces his discovery of the "Algernon-Gordon Effect": "artificially-induced intelligence deteriorates at a rate of time directly proportional to the quantity of the increase." Charlie will revert to his former IQ within a matter of months. Shortly after this discovery, Algernon dies.

Faced with the prospect of losing all he has gained, Charlie seeks to come to terms with himself and his memories. He visits his mother and sister, who still live in Brooklyn. Rose has sunk into senility and only momentarily recognizes her son. Norma, far from being the hateful rival Charlie remembers, is a kind and intelligent woman who sincerely regrets both Charlie's hardships and her own inability to help him through them.

Charlie also comes to terms with Alice Kinnian, who is determined to stick by him as long as possible Having put the ghosts of his past to rest, he is finally able to make love to her, and they are fully together for a brief time. But Charlie's decline is rapid, and he pushes Alice away before he completely reverts to his former self.

Charlie's final Progress Reports reflect his rapid deterioration as his writing reverts to its earlier semi-literacy. However, he has retained some memory of his experiences, and perhaps some insight as well. When he goes back to his old job at the bakery, he notes, "if they make fun of you don't get sore because you remember their not so smart like you once thot they were." The bakery workers accept him back; Carp and Reilly, who formerly had tormented Charlie, defend him when a new worker makes fun of him. However, Charlie finally decides to leave New York for good and check him self into the Warren State Home and Training School. His final Progress Report, dated only eight months after the first, asks that someone "put some flowers on Algernon's grave in the bak yard."

Progress Report 1

Progress Report 1 Summary

Charlie Gordon begins his journal on March 3 at the request of Dr. Strauss, who is evaluating him for an experiment. Charlie is thirty-two years old, works for Donner's Bakery, and attends the Beekman College Center for Retarded Adults three days a week. Miss Kinnian, Charlie's teacher, says Dr. Strauss might be able to make him smart. In the journal, Charlie is supposed to write down everything he thinks and remembers about what happens from now on.

Progress Report 1 Analysis

Flowers for Algernon is about a man with an I.Q. of 68 who becomes a genius because of a scientific experiment. The story is told through a series of progress reports written by Charlie Gordon, the main character and first-person narrator. The progress reports detail Charlie's experiences—both external and internal—as his I.Q. increases and finally deteriorates again after experimental surgery. The use of the progress reports, written in Charlie's own words, allow the reader to witness first-hand Charlie's changing intellect and perception through the course of the story.

The early progress reports, beginning on March 3, before the experimental surgery, are riddled with errors. The language is simple and reveals a kind, child-like man with a mental handicap who is nevertheless determined to improve himself. Later, as Charlie's I.Q. increases, the progress reports will evolve into detailed scenes filled with sharp sensory perceptions and acute observations about the people and the world around him. His writing will become more correct and complex, incorporating slang, symbolism and dialogue. When Charlie's I.Q. again deteriorates at the end of the story, the progress reports reflect this, becoming again simple and repetitive, and filled with errors.

Progress Report 2

Progress Report 2 Summary

The next day, Charlie writes that he is afraid he failed a Rorschach, or inkblot, test given to him by a doctor named Burt at Professor Nemur's office. Burt is nice to him and tells him to relax, and he talks and wears a white coat like a regular doctor or dentist, but all he has is white cards with inkblots on them. When he asks Charlie what they look like, Charlie says they look like spilled ink. No matter how many times Burt tells him to imagine a picture in the ink, Charlie cannot, which is why he thinks he's failed the test.

Progress Report 2 Analysis

Burt is a graduate student working at Beekman, and will become one of Charlie's closest friends, often helping Charlie to interpret what is happening to him, as well as the motivations of Professor Nemur. Right now, the inkblot test Burt gives Charlie serves as a baseline for Charlie's abilities. After the surgery, Burt will perform the test again. At that time, the test will mark an important turning point for Charlie, serving as "proof" of the profound changes that have happened in him so gradually he has not even noticed.

Progress Report 3

Progress Report 3 Summary

On March 5, Charlie writes that Dr. Strauss and Professor Nemur told him the inkblot test does not matter, and they might still use him. Charlie wants to participate in the experiment, because all his life he has wanted to be smart. His mom told him to work hard in Miss Kinnian's class, and he has. She says he is her best pupil because he really wants to learn.

Dr. Strauss does not know how the experiment will turn out, because it has only been done on animals, but Charlie does not care, even if it hurts. He is strong and determined to work hard. They tell him they will need permission from his family, but his Uncle Herman, who used to take care of him, is dead, and he has not seen his parents or his little sister Norma in a very long time. He does not remember much about them, and thinks that maybe they are dead, too.

Charlie hopes he does not have to keep writing too much. It is hard and takes him a long time. He has to stay up late to do it and is tired at work. His friend Gimpy hollered at him for dropping a tray of rolls. Gimpy hollers at him a lot.

Progress Report 3 Analysis

The third progress report reveals more about Charlie's life, and foreshadows some of the conflicts he will face after his surgery. By this time, we can perceive—and so foresee—some of the things Charlie does not, which makes him an *unreliable narrator*.

First-person narrators are sometimes unreliable—meaning we cannot trust what they say. Unreliable narrators often make statements and observations that are designed to convince us (or themselves) of something that is not true, generally because they are unable to face the truth of their situations. When we read a story narrated by an unreliable narrator, we must constantly work to distinguish between the truth of a situation and the way that narrator wants us to perceive the situation, with the ultimate meaning of the story located somewhere in the narrator's purpose for lying to us. However, in *Flowers for Algernon*, Charlie is an unreliable narrator because he simply is not able to perceive the reality of many situations. Charlie approaches life literally and simply, and he tends to believe what people tell him. For this reason, he may not recognize that some of his "friends" are not actually his friends, a truth that will dawn on him later and become one of his deepest sources of grief. He has not seen his family in a long time, and so he can only assume they may be dead, too. At this point, it never occurs to him that other people have selfish, more complex, motivations for the things they say and do.

Charlie's own motivation is equally simple: he wants to be smart. For now, this is his only concern, and he does everything he's told, expecting that if he's "good" and "works hard," he will succeed.

Progress Report 4

Progress Report 4 Summary

The next day, Charlie is given another test. This time he has been told to make up stories about people in pictures, but he cannot, because that would be like lying and he used to be hit for lying. Besides, he does not know the people, so he does not see how he can tell stories about them. He offers to tell stories about his Uncle Herman instead, but the lady giving him the test does not want to hear those.

After that, Burt takes him up to the Psychology Laboratory, where he gives Charlie some puzzles and mazes. The puzzles are hard and Charlie does not understand the maze at all. Finally, Burt takes him to the fifth floor, where more people are working with monkeys and mice. He takes a mouse out of the one of the cages and tells Charlie his name is Algernon.

Burt puts Algernon in a box fixed up as a maze with a screen on top and Charlie watches Algernon run the maze. Burt asks if he would like to race Algernon, and gives Charlie an electric pencil. When Charlie goes the wrong way, it gives him a mild electric shock. Algernon beats him through the maze, and again ten more times. Charlie did not realize mice were so smart.

Progress Report 4 Analysis

Because of Charlie's low I.Q., he is unable to think in abstract terms; rather he interprets everything he sees and hears literally. He does not distinguish between creativity—making up stories—and lying, and he sticks to the simple rules he understands: if you lie, you are punished. The reader understands that as his I.Q. increases, Charlie will be able to process these abstractions and imagine pictures in the ink. However, Charlie will find it much more difficult to adapt his understanding of society's "rules," which are much more complex than the black-and-white rules he is used to.

Algernon is also introduced in this progress report. Having already undergone the experimental surgery, Algernon will become the gauge against which the doctors, Charlie and we assess Charlie's progress.

Progress Report 5

Progress Report 5 Summary

On the same day, Charlie writes that they found his sister Norma living with their mother in Brooklyn and got permission to use Charlie in the experiment. However, Charlie overhears Dr. Strauss and Burt Selden arguing with Professor Nemur, who doesn't want to use him. Dr. Strauss and Burt say that Charlie has tremendous motivation, while most people of his intelligence are hostile or apathetic. Charlie does not know what "motivation" means, but it makes him feel good that he has something and that it's high. They say Algernon has it, too.

However, Dr. Strauss is worried that Charlie's IQ will rise too high from what it is now, 68, and that it will make him sick. Dr. Strauss says he knows Charlie is not what Professor Nemur had in mind, but he is good-natured and eager to please. Charlie will be the first person ever to have his intelligence increased by surgery, and they will not find another person so eager to learn. He has already made a tremendous achievement in learning to read and write.

Professor Nemur finally agrees, and Charlie is overjoyed. Professor Nemur warns him that they've never done this with another human being—only mice like Algernon—and while they're sure it won't be physically dangerous, nothing might happen, or the effects might be temporary, and then Charlie might be worse off than before. If that happens, he would have to go to the Warren State Home.

Charlie does not care, because he knows he is strong and he will work hard. He is not afraid of anything, and besides, he has his lucky rabbit's foot. He tells them they will not be sorry and he is going to try very hard.

Progress Report 5 Analysis

Charlie's understanding of the consequences of the experiment is vague, while we understand that they are very real. Charlie believes that if he works hard and relies on lucky charms, everything will work out. He does not have a clear idea of the future, any more than he does of the past—he learns that his sister is alive, but he does not wonder why he has not seen her. Professor Nemur's warning adds to the story an element of suspense. We understand what Charlie does not—that he is taking a tremendous risk. Until now, Charlie, despite his low I.Q., has been relatively independent. If the experiment fails, he may have to be institutionalized in a state home, a consequence of which his sister is surely aware . We now begin to see Charlie has a blindly trusting individual whose welfare relies on people who do not necessarily have Charlie's own best interests at heart.

Progress Report 6

Progress Report 6 Summary

Just before the operation, Charlie is scared. People from the medical school and the Psychology Department bring him flowers and wish him luck, and Miss Kinnian brings him some magazines to read. The people from the bakery bring him a chocolate cake and say they hope he is better soon. Professor Nemur has told Charlie he should not tell them about the operation, in case it does not work.

Charlie asks him if he will be able to beat Algernon in the race after he has the operation, and Professor Nemur says maybe. Charlie cannot wait. If the operation works, he will be able to read and write well and be like other people. He will get smart and maybe be able to find his mom and dad and sister and show them. He thinks, won't they be surprised to see him smart just like them?

Professor Nemur says if the operation works and it is permanent, they will make other people like Charlie smart, too. Charlie will be famous and his name will go down in the books. Charlie does not care if he is famous. He just wants to be smart like everyone else so he can have many friends.

Progress Report 6 Analysis

It is not until the surgery that we learn Charlie's real motivation: Charlie associates being smart with having friends. He wants to have many friends, and he wants to get smart. To Charlie, it is a simple formula. He believes his family, who has been largely absent from his adult life, will be surprised to see he is just like them after the surgery. His implicit hope is that by becoming smart he will get his family back. Again, we understand that it probably will not be nearly as simple as Charlie believes it will be.

Progress Report 7

Progress Report 7 Summary

Once the bandages are removed from his eyes, Charlie writes again on March 11, three days after the operation. He says the operation did not hurt, though it scared him, being wheeled into the green room with all the doctors standing up high. He did not know it was going to be like a show.

Burt comes every day to take his temperature and blood pressure and record other things. He says it is because of the scientific method; they have to keep records so they can do it again. That is why Charlie has to write his progress reports. They are going to make Photostats of them so they'll know what's going on in his head. However, Charlie doesn't even know what's going on in his head, no matter how many he times goes over the journals. He keeps trying, though, because he hopes if he gets smart, he can talk with Joe Carp, Frank and Gimpy at the bakery about God or politics. He thinks if you are smart you can have many friends to talk to, and you are not lonely all the time. Professor Nemur tells him it is fine to write about things like that, but Charlie should also write about his feelings and try to remember the past. Charlie tries, but he cannot remember. He wonders what smart people think about and imagines it is fancy things.

A nurse named Hilda takes care of him, but she tells Charlie maybe God did not want him to be smart and they should not have tried to make him that way. She talks about Adam, Eve and the apple, and although Charlie did not eat an apple, he is afraid, because he does not want to make God angry.

The next day, they replace his nurse with Lucille, who is very nice. When Charlie asks about Hilda, Lucille tells him they sent her to the Maternity Ward, where she can talk all she wants. Charlie asks her what maternity is, and she says it is about having babies. However, when he asks her how they have babies, she gets red in the face like Hilda. Nobody ever tells Charlie about the babies. He hopes if he gets smart, he will find out.

Charlie is disappointed that he is not smart already. He thought it would work right away, but Miss Kinnian tells him that is not how it works. He still has to work hard, but the surgery is supposed to help him remember what he learns. Charlie had hoped to go back to the bakery and show the guys he was smart, and then find his mom and dad. He thought if he showed his mom he was smart, as she always wanted him to be, they would not send him away again. He tells Miss Kinnian he is going to try as hard as he can, and she pats him on the hand and says she has faith in him.

Progress Report 7 Analysis

Charlie reiterates his real motivation—he is desperately lonely, isolated by his low I.Q., because he is unable to communicate with others on their level. He hopes that if he gets smart he will not be lonely anymore and his family will take him back. However, the

nurse Hilda warns him that in tampering with nature—or God's intentions—Charlie may only be bringing trouble on himself.

While *Flowers for Algernon* explores several themes, the two most important are prejudice and knowledge versus ignorance. It is clear by now that Charlie has suffered from prejudice against him, even if he isn't fully aware of it himself. His "friends" at the bakery yell at him, and his family sent him away, apparently because he was not "smart." Right now, Charlie's inability to recognize people's true motivations has allowed him at least the belief that he has friends, and to accept responsibility for his family's abandonment of him. He believes that if he changes—fixes his own flaws—his family will accept him. However, the nurse in the hospital believes Charlie was born the way he was for a reason. In speaking of Adam and Eve eating the apple from the Tree of Knowledge, she is describing Charlie and Professor Nemur and Dr. Strauss defying God's will to gain knowledge that can only result in pain. We often say "ignorance is bliss," and because of the surgery and his higher intellect, Charlie will have to ask himself whether gaining knowledge—learning the truth about people and the world—is worth the pain it brings him.

In addition, the Biblical story of creation is one in which gaining knowledge resulted in human awareness of nakedness and sexuality, feelings of shame, and inevitable death. Charlie, who does not yet know how babies are born, will later face shame and guilt resulting from a new awareness of his own sexuality.

Another idea in the story is one that fills contemporary debates—the results of using science to tamper with nature. Hilda represents the view that nature, or God, has a grand design with an ultimate purpose, even if we cannot see it. Professor Nemur and Dr. Strauss represent the idea that science can improve upon nature's mistakes. This implies that Charlie's low I.Q., if not Charlie himself, is, at least in their perspective, a mistake of nature.

Progress Report 8

Progress Report 8 Summary

On March 15, Charlie is out of the hospital but not back at work. He is frustrated that nothing seems to be happening, and Algernon keeps beating him at the maze. He hates that stupid mouse, and he hates the mazes. He also gets headaches from trying to remember. Dr. Strauss had said he would help Charlie, but he will not tell him what to think.

The next day, Charlie eats lunch with Burt at the college restaurant. He watches the students. Burt says they are talking about art, religion and politics. Charlie hopes he can talk about those things soon. The students give him a funny look and he almost tells them he will be smart soon, but Burt stops him. He says Professor Nemur does not want to be laughed at if the experiment is a failure, especially by the Welberg Foundation, which gave him money for the project.

On March 20, Charlie goes back to work. The lab is paying him to keep writing the progress reports, and to take tests every night, so it is like a part-time job. Dr. Strauss tells him to keep his notebook with him at work and not to get discouraged. He says the changes happen so slowly Charlie will not even notice them. This is apparent in the slight improvement in Charlie's writing, but it is not apparent to him. Dr. Strauss tells him Algernon had the operation, too, and he is the first mouse to stay smart this long. This makes Charlie feel better about Algernon beating him. He thinks maybe someday he will beat the mouse after all.

The next day, Joe Carp looks at where Charlie had his operation and asked if they put some brains in. Charlie almost tells him when he remembers not to. Frank Reilly asks if he opened a door the hard way. That makes Charlie laugh.

While he was gone, Mr. Donner hired a boy named Ernie to do the deliveries Charlie normally does. Charlie does not understand why Mr. Donner does not fire him now that he is back. Mr. Donner asks Charlie if he knows how long he has been at the store. Charlie does not remember. Mr. Donner tells him it's been seventeen years since his Uncle Herman, who was Mr. Donner's best friend, brought Charlie and asked Mr. Donner to let him work here. Uncle Herman died two years later and Charlie's mother had him committed to the Warren Home. Mr. Donner got Charlie released on an outside work placement, so Charlie never spent a night in the Home. The bakery business is not so good anymore, but Mr. Donner tells Charlie he will always have a place to work there, and he should not worry about him bringing someone else in. Ernie needs money; Mr. Donner is going to keep him on as an apprentice baker and Charlie can be his assistant.

Ernie is smart, but the others do not like him much. When Ernie loses a package, they say he pulled a "Charlie Gordon." Charlie does not understand why, since he never lost

a package. Charlie asks Mr. Donner if he can learn to be an apprentice baker, but Mr. Donner looks at him funny and Frank, who hears, laughs and laughs. Mr. Donner tells him the work of a baker is very complicated and he should not worry about things like that. Charlie wishes he could tell them about the operation.

On March 24, Professor Nemur and Dr. Strauss bring Charlie a TV, which they say will play movies to help him learn while he is asleep. Charlie does not see what good it will do, but Dr. Strauss is pleased that Charlie is questioning authority. The TV keeps him awake at night, and a couple of days later it wakes him up in the middle of the night. He cannot get back to sleep because it keeps saying *remember*. Charlie remembers the first time he went to the Beekman College and met Miss Kinnian. A long time ago, he asked Joe Carp how he learned to read. He laughed and told Charlie not to waste his time, but Fanny Birden heard and told him about the adult center for retarded people at the Beekman College. After work, Charlie walked the six blocks to the school. On the way, he bought a newspaper. He waited until most of the people had left, and then went up to one of the ladies. It was Miss Kinnian. She said she would teach him how to read, but that it would take a very long time.

Now that Charlie is having these dreams, Professor Nemur makes him have therapy sessions with Dr. Strauss. However, Charlie is so tired he falls asleep in the middle of the session. By March 28, he is sleeping better because Dr. Strauss has shown him how to keep the TV's volume low. Now he has a headache from a party at Halloran's Bar, where the people at work took him for some drinks. When they asked, Charlie danced on the counter and showed them how he cleaned the toilets with a mop. They laughed and had a good time. Then they asked him to go around the corner to see if it was raining. When Charlie came back, no one was in the bar. He thought they might have gone to find him, but the streets reminded him of the maze he runs with Algernon and he got lost. Mrs. Flynn told him a policeman brought him home. The same night, Charlie dreamed of the time he got lost in a department store. Now he has a lump on his head and bruises all over his body. Joe Carp tells him he might have been rolled or the cop let him have it, but Charlie does not think cops do that. He decides not to drink whiskey anymore.

On March 29, Charlie beats Algernon for the first time, and then eight more times. He thinks he must be getting smarter, though he does not feel smarter. Burt let him hold Algernon. Charlie feels sorry for the mouse because he has to pass a test for his food. He decides to make friends with Algernon after all.

Dr. Strauss gives him some pink pills to help him sleep. He says that is when most of the changes happen in Charlie's brain. Miss Kinnian comes to see him, and they read from *Robinson Crusoe*. She also teaches Charlie how to spell better. Charlie still finds spelling hard, but Miss Kinnian tells him it is not supposed to make sense.

Progress Report 8 Analysis

Charlie is clearly the butt of his friends' jokes, which are so reckless as to be physically dangerous. However, Charlie doesn't yet recognize it, assuming he's so dumb he causes his own problems, and absolving others of any responsibility. The fact that he finally beats Algernon at the race, and the gradual improvement in his writing, shows us that the surgery succeeded and Charlie is getting smarter. We have to wonder what will happen when he finally realizes what his so-called friends are doing to him. Although they may not be true friends, they are the only friends Charlie has, with the exception of Miss Kinnian.

As his intelligence changes, Charlie begins to remember more, the memories of the past initially coming to him in his dreams. Professor Nemur and Dr. Strauss insist on increasing his therapy sessions, recognizing that as Charlie remembers increasingly about the past, these memories, combined with his new intelligence, will force him to redefine everything he understands about his life. Charlie still does not understand what we do—that knowledge can be painful, and that the kind of knowledge Charlie eventually gains may even be destructive.

Progress Report 9

Progress Report 9 Summary

Charlie's entries from April 1 through April 18 show a remarkable change in both his intellectual abilities and his awareness of the world. On April Fool's Day, the guys at the bakery, playing a joke, tell Charlie to try to work the dough mixer. Charlie is afraid to try, since Gimpy, who is the head baker, always told him to stay away from the mixer because he might get hurt. Charlie has been watching a long time, and when he tries, he finds he can mix the dough even better than Oliver, who just quit. The guys are amazed, and when Mr. Donner promotes him to dough mixer, the rest are angry. It turns out the joke is on them.

Miss Kinnian tells Charlie he is learning fast, but when she reads his progress reports, she gets upset and says he'll show them after all. Charlie does not know what she's talking about, but she warns him he may find out people aren't as nice as he thinks. He thinks Miss Kinnian is nice, and this reminds him of his mother. He remembers when she brought his baby sister home from the hospital. Although he wanted them to bring a boy, his sister was nice, like a little doll. One time she was crying and his parents were in the kitchen, so Charlie picked her up. His mother came in yelling and took the baby away. She slapped him so hard he fell on the bed. Charlie realizes now his mother was afraid he would hurt the baby, because he was too dumb to know what to do. This makes him feel bad. He would never have hurt the baby.

Miss Kinnian teaches Charlie about punctuation. He finds it fun, but he does not really understand it, and in the next few entries, he sprinkles punctuation indiscriminately through the sentences. Then he reads a grammar book and overnight it all comes clear. He is embarrassed by his early entries, and he tells Miss Kinnian he should go back and fix the errors, but she says it's important to keep them as they are.

At another party, Charlie finally realizes that the guys from the bakery have been making fun of him. They bring a girl, Ellen, and make Charlie dance with her, but they keep sticking out their feet to trip him. Ellen rubs against him, making him feel funny, and Charlie suddenly remembers playing hide-and-seek with the kids when he was young. They would make him "it," and after he'd count to ten on his fingers he'd never be able to find them. He realizes now they were playing tricks on him, laughing at him, and it is the same thing the guys from the bakery are doing. Charlie is humiliated and runs home. That night, he has an embarrassing dream about Ellen.

Charlie decides it is good to know the others are making fun of him. He knows he is getting smarter now. His spelling is getting better and he looks up words in the dictionary. He is also having vivid memories of when he was younger. These are full of sights, sounds, and smells, but seeing through the eyes of the Charlie in his memories, he cannot read words or understand things as he does now. He records the memories in detail, using the third-person.

Dr. Strauss says the more intelligent Charlie becomes, then the more problems he is going to have, especially after his intelligence outstrips his emotional growth. Charlie still doesn't understand what it's all about, but Dr. Strauss tells him that someday all the dreams and memories are going to come together and Charlie will learn more about himself.

Charlie is reading a lot now, including history, geography and math. However, Professor Nemur makes him promise not to read about psychology until he says it's okay. He is afraid it will confuse Charlie and make him think about theories instead of his own ideas and feelings. Charlie reads many novels, including *The Great Gatsby*. He never realized men and women did the things written about in the books.

By April 16, Charlie feels better, but he is still angry about the fact that people were always making fun of him and he did not know it. His IQ is now 100, though no one seems to be able to agree exactly what IQ measures.

After a nightmare, Charlie free-associates the way Dr. Strauss told him to. He recalls a girl named Harriet he knew when he was eleven. All the boys were in love with pretty Harriet, and on Valentine's Day, because all the boys were doing it, Charlie gave her a Valentine. It was a locket he found in the street and liked to play with, and he got one of the boys to write a message for him. He left the package inside her apartment door and hid while she found it. The next day, she did not speak to him, and later her older brothers beat him up and called him a degenerate. Charlie was transferred to another school. Now Charlie realizes he could not trust any of the boys—they had played a trick on him, too.

When Charlie goes back for another Rorschach test, he gets angry with Burt, who asks him what the inkblots make him think of. Charlie accuses Burt of tricking him the last time, because that was not what he had said before. He thinks everyone is making fun of him, and he storms out, but Burt and Professor Nemur come after him. They convince him to listen to the tape recording of the first session. Charlie listens in shock. Burt used almost the exact same words; Charlie just did not understand before. This time, when they go through the cards, Charlie "sees" things. However, the test still doesn't make any sense to him. How could they know whether he was just pretending to see things in the cards?

All the same, Charlie realizes he has reached a new level, and his first reaction to the world has been one of anger and suspicion. He starts to feel bothered by people reading his journal, though he does not know why it should.

Progress Report 9 Analysis

Progress Report 9 marks an important turning point for Charlie. There has been a drastic change in his intelligence, and the new inkblot test—not so much the results of it as Charlie's understanding of it—makes it clear to him for the first time that he's smarter. Charlie's new intelligence has brought the inevitable awareness that, this entire time,

people, including those he believed to be his friends, have been making fun of him. His memories have become both darker and more detailed as he begins to making some meaning of them: his mother was afraid he'd hurt his baby sister, which may provide a clue as to why he was sent away; and even as a child, he suffered terrible injury as a result of other people's pranks. He realizes now that he has been abused because of other people's prejudice against him. It is as if Charlie has been reborn, and he recognizes that "his first reaction to the world has been one of anger and suspicion." The world is not the kind place he thought it was, and knowing it is certainly painful. However, given a choice, Charlie decides he would rather have the painful truth.

He still does not yet understand what Dr. Strauss is saying when he warns Charlie that his intellect will soon outstrip his emotional growth. Charlie may learn a great deal, even about people, but it may be a long time before he is able to handle his knowledge in an emotionally healthy, constructive way. Navigating life successfully requires more than a knowledge of facts, which is all the surgery was intended to help him gain.

Charlie's self-awareness also brings with it the kind of self-consciousness foreshadowed by Hilda in Progress Report 7—Charlie starts to feel bothered by his personal thoughts being read, a reaction similar to a feeling of being stripped naked in public.

Another important change revealed by the progress reports is Charlie's perception of his pre-surgery self as a separate individual. He views his memories as if watching a film, and though he can see through that Charlie's eyes, he records the memories in third person, understanding what the character in those memories does not. The distinction between the old and new Charlie in his own mind will become sharper as his intelligence continues to increase, and will eventually present Charlie with a crisis of conscience.

Progress Report 10

Progress Report 10 Summary

Charlie has figured out a new way to set up the mixing machines in the bakery to speed production, and Mr. Donner gives him another raise. Everyone else seems frightened and hostile toward him. Charlie cannot entirely blame them; they do not understand the changes in him. He remembers when Gimpy and Frank tried to teach him how to make rolls. Gimpy offered him a shiny good luck piece if he could get it right. They showed him repeatedly, but when they waited for him to do it on his own, he could not. Charlie was afraid, and felt the pressure, vaguely remembering being punished when he could not learn. He felt if they would just give him more time he would be able to remember what they had shown him, but they got frustrated and gave up. Later, Gimpy gave him the good luck piece. Now Charlie thinks that was nice of him, and wonders why he did it.

Deciding he needs someone to talk to, Charlie thinks about asking Miss Kinnian to a movie to celebrate his raise. He goes to the lab to ask Dr. Strauss or Professor Nemur about the idea, but he overhears them arguing. Professor Nemur wants to present an interim report on the experiment, but Dr. Strauss feels it is too early. Professor Nemur insists that the patterns of the experiment have been predictable thus far, and nothing is going to happen, but the argument deteriorates, with each calling the other names like *opportunist*, *cynic* and *pessimist*. Charlie understands suddenly that these men are not the gods and heroes he thought, but just men, worried about their work. He also realizes they probably would not want him eavesdropping, since he understands now what they are saying. He decides to wait to ask their advice.

Charlie spends his free time at the college, where he continues to listen to the students. He carries books and pretends he is a student, too. He even starts to smoke a pipe, though he knows it is silly. He makes friends with some of the boys at the Campus Bowl, who argue about who really wrote Shakespeare's plays. They also talk about politics and God. For the first time, Charlie hears that there might not be a God, and he realizes that college is a place where you go to learn "that the things you believed in all your life aren't true, and that nothing is what it appears to be." He also spends time at the library, where he devours books, especially classic novels.

Late in the month, he dreams of his mom screaming at his dad, and in the morning he remembers his parents more clearly than ever before. His mother is a thin, dark-haired woman with busy hands, and she is yelling at his dad that Charlie is normal, and he should not be taken out of public school. His dad tells her she pushes Charlie too hard, and he is never going to be normal. Charlie is six. He is in the kitchen, playing with his spinner, but he has to go to the bathroom. He wants his mother to take him, but she has determined to make him go on his own. As his parents scream over him, the tension builds in Charlie until he finally soils himself and his mother screams at him. Charlie

remembers now that her name is Rose, and his father's name is Matt. He wishes he could see their faces more clearly.

Progress Report 10 Analysis

For the first time, Charlie is able to view people realistically, as having motives of their own. While Professor Nemur and Dr. Strauss call each other names, Charlie can see them clearly as ordinary human beings with ordinary concerns about their work. He is now on their intellectual level, though he fails to recognize that the substance of their argument might be a cause for concern—Dr. Strauss does not completely trust the results they have seen so far. This is probably because Charlie is in a kind of honeymoon-phase with his new intelligence, using every opportunity he can to do the things he has always wanted, like talk with the college students. His realization that college is a place where you learn "that the things you believed in all your life aren't true, and that nothing is what it appears to be" is an important achievement in his progress; with his new intellect, the world has become Charlie's school.

Successful social interaction relies in part on the ability to empathize—that is, to identify with others. Although Charlie is just beginning to understand that little in the world is what it once appeared to be, he has gained enough of an empathy with other people to instinctively incorporate more advanced social skills into his behavior—for example, he respects the doctors' privacy when he realizes he's eavesdropping. He begins to understand not only how he influences others but also how he has been impacted by them. When he remembers his parents, Charlie is able to identity the conflicting motives of his mother and father, his mother desperately wanting him to be normal, and his father fearing she is pushing Charlie beyond his limits. He also recognizes that the conflict created an unbearable tension in him, one that may never have been resolved.

Progress Report 11

Progress Report 11 Summary

This progress report covers the month of May and Charlie's developing relationship with Alice Kinnian. He writes that he never noticed before how beautiful she is. When he takes her to the movies, he can barely focus on what he is seeing. He is too preoccupied with the feeling of her leg next to his and how he can get his arm around her smoothly. The second film of the two they watch bothers him, because Charlie says the parts did not fit together, as if the director forced something in that did not belong. It was a story about a man who almost kills his wife before he remembers that his anger is really toward his old governess. Miss Kinnian is amazed by his insight, but Charlie says he is not really accomplishing anything. He still does not understand himself or his past, and his parents' faces are still a blur. She tells him to be patient; he is accomplishing in weeks what takes other people a lifetime.

At dinner, Charlie tells Alice he likes her, but he is unable to clearly express his feelings. Although his speech reveals more maturity and awareness, and he's now swearing and calling men by their last names (like "Nemur" and "Strauss"), Alice is afraid he's still emotionally immature. He ends up knocking over a glass and spilling water on her. As they ride home in the taxi, she tells Charlie not to let it upset him. He feels ridiculous, but she says these feelings for her are new to him. She also worries that upsetting him might have a negative effect on his progress. She does not feel they have a right to put their relationship on a personal level, when Charlie has obligations now, not only to Professor Nemur and Dr. Strauss, but also to the millions of others who might follow in his footsteps. Charlie feels like a blundering adolescent being let down easy. He wants to kiss her goodnight, but he does not dare. He's furious at her, at himself, and at the world, and none of his books explain how to act toward her. He knows she is right, but he does not know if she actually cares about him. He decides that the next time, he will kiss her goodnight.

Charlie's feelings for Alice give him nightmares. In one, a girl with a knife rubs against him, and he feels a strange bubbling and throbbing. When he looks up, there is a knife in her hands, and he tries to scream and run. He has lost something, but he doesn't know what it is, and there is blood on his hands. When Charlie wakes up, he makes himself coffee and smokes a cigarette as he free-associates. He remembers Norma taking a bath and realizing her body is different from his. Then he is being chased down a hallway by a big kitchen knife. He is scared and crying, and his neck is cut and bleeding. Norma is telling their mother he was peeking at her through the keyhole.

Thinking back, Charlie can understand why he was taught to stay away from women. He realizes he has no right to think of Alice the way he does—not yet. However, he wonders why these memories still frighten him so much, and something in him shouts that he's a person, and that he was somebody even before he went under the surgeon's knife.

At the bakery, Charlie realizes Gimpy is undercharging customers and they are splitting the difference. Before, Gimpy used Charlie as an unwitting accomplice when he sent Charlie to make the deliveries. Now Charlie realizes what's going on—he can automatically calculate the prices in his head. This presents him with a dilemma. Gimpy has always been nice to him, but so has Mr. Donner, and Gimpy is stealing from him. Gimpy has a family and Charlie doesn't want to get him in trouble, but it makes him mad that Gimpy used him, and that he's taking advantage of Mr. Donner's trust.

Charlie consults Professor Nemur, who tells him that it is not Charlie's concern, and that Charlie is not responsible, any more than a knife is responsible for a stabbing. Charlie protests that he is not an inanimate object, but a person, though Professor Nemur quickly backpedals, saying he was talking about Charlie's culpability before the operation. This only makes Charlie angry with the pompous doctor, and he says even before the operation, he was a person.

He decides to ask Dr. Strauss, who tells him he has a moral obligation to tell Mr. Donner. However, the more Charlie thinks about it, the more complicated the problem seems. He decides to ask Alice Kinnian, and convinces her to meet him for dinner. Alice tells him that no book can answer his questions, and he has to decide what he feels is right. She says that despite how much he has advanced, he is still a child when it comes to making decisions, and he has to learn to make them on his own. Although he is annoyed at her lecture, he realizes she is right.

At her door, Charlie wants to kiss her goodnight, but she begs him not to push her. She says he has already gone beyond her own intellectual reach, and there is no telling where he will be in a few months, or if he will even still want her. Nevertheless, he convinces her to let him take her out again, this time to a public concert, where there will be other people. She gives him a kiss on the cheek and Charlie realizes he is in love.

At the bakery, Charlie settles on a compromise and tells Gimpy he has a friend who works with a fellow he knows is stealing. He says the friend will have nothing to report if the coworker stops the stealing, but if he does not, then his friend will have to go to the boss. Gimpy gets angry but agrees to stop.

Charlie's studies are going well, so well that he cannot find anyone with whom to share his ideas. Even the professors he is introduced to shy away when he asks them questions, and he realizes that rather than being the intellectual giants he thought they were, they are so specialized they are afraid of appearing inadequate.

On May 17, Charlie takes Alice to the concert in the park. Alice focuses on the orchestra while he slips his arm around her waist. Charlie realizes that she is using the music to avoid acknowledging or consenting to what he is doing. He confronts her, but she admits she is trying to pretend *she* does not exist. As soon as he pulls her toward him, Charlie begins to hear a buzzing in his ears, like a far-away electric saw. Then he sees a boy crouching in the dark, watching them. Furious, Charlie runs after him, but he is unable to catch the boy. Alice says she never saw him. Still, the incident so shakes Charlie that he drops her off at home, declining to come in when she invites him. He

thinks the boy might have been a hallucination, triggered by his fears of sexual situations. He decides he has to accept that emotionally he is still an adolescent and not ready for a relationship with Alice.

A few days later, Charlie is fired from the bakery. Mr. Donner feels bad about it, but he says the others have petitioned to get rid of Charlie because they are afraid of him. He tells Charlie that ordinarily he would not listen to them, but it is obvious Charlie has somehow managed to become a very smart young man, and he can do better than the bakery now. Although Charlie knows that is true, the bakery is still his home, and he is afraid to leave it. He tries to convince Mr. Donner to let him stay, and Mr. Donner relents, saying he can stay if he can convince the others. However, when Charlie confronts the others, they're quick to tell him that he's gotten too smart, and that now he's an egghead, always making them look bad. They do not like being made to look bad by a moron.

Fanny Birden, who always stuck up for him, says she did not sign the petition despite their threats, but she cannot help but think there is something strange about him. She tells Charlie he used to be a good, dependable man who was honest, if not too bright. She is afraid of what he's done to get so smart all of a sudden, and wonders if he's made some kind of deal with the devil. She tells Charlie that if he would read his Bible he would know that "it's not meant for man to know more than was given to him to know by the Lord in the first place. The fruit of that tree was forbidden to man." She tells him it might not be too late to get out of whatever he has done.

Charlie says it is too late, and he is like a blind man who has learned to see. He says soon that there will be millions like him, science can do that and it cannot be sinful. She says it was sinful when Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge, and it was evil when they saw they were naked, and that is why people feel lust and shame, grow old and die.

Charlie feels like his intelligence has driven a wedge between him and everyone about whom he has ever cared. Instead of making friends, he is more alone than ever, driven out of the only real home he has ever known- the bakery. Later, he tells Alice he feels like an animal locked out of its safe cage. She tries to tell him not to take it so hard, and that his fear is normal, but knowing intellectually why he feels so lost does not help him to deal with it. Alice tells him that they are pushing him too hard. He wants to be an adult, but there is still a little boy inside him, alone and frightened. When she puts his head on her shoulder, Charlie knows she needs him the same way he needs her.

She tells him not to be afraid of her, but Charlie remembers being flashed by a middle-aged woman when he made a delivery to her and feeling terror because his mother used to beat him whenever his body betrayed a sexual response. Then he has a clear picture of his mother whipping him with a leather belt and his father screaming at her to leave him alone. He got an erection when one of Norma's friends came over and his mother was saying she was going to beat the filth out of his mind. His father was trying to tell her it was normal, but she said Charlie had no business thinking that way about

girls. She said if he ever touched one she would put him in a cage like an animal for the rest of his life.

Charlie can still hear her, but he wonders if he can now separate the past from the present. He thinks if he can reach Alice in time, before the fear overwhelms him, he might not panic. He begs her to hold him, and then she is kissing him, holding him closer than anyone ever has before. Nevertheless, the buzzing starts again, and the chill and nausea, and he turns away. Alice tries to soothe him, but Charlie is ashamed and begins to sob. He cries himself to sleep in her arms, this time dreaming of a courtier and a maiden in one of Alice's framed pictures. In his dream, the maiden is holding the sword.

Progress Report 11 Analysis

Charlie's new awareness of the world and of himself has resulted in inevitable romantic and sexual feelings. He is an adult man who now has adult perceptions, even if he's still learning to make meaning of those perceptions. He now knows how things work intellectually—sex, for example—but as Dr. Strauss warned, he does not yet know how to handle himself in those situations. He is clumsy and embarrassed around Alice Kinnian, much as an adolescent boy would be, and when he's fired from the bakery, he knows it's probably for the best, though *knowing* doesn't help him feel better about it.

Instead, Charlie is becoming increasingly isolated. His intelligence has now surpassed that of the people he wanted to be close to, like Alice Kinnian and the bakery employees; he cannot even have productive conversations with the professors at the university, who are supposed to be specialists in the information he has been studying. Charlie has absorbed so much knowledge that no one else can possibly keep up, and he now finds himself on the other side of the communication barrier, just as trapped by his high I.Q. as he had been by his low one. At the same time, his emotional growth has not caught up with his intellect, so that even if he could communicate with other people, he is unable to meaningfully interact with them.

This proves an even more difficult problem for Charlie, as his awareness of his own sexuality stimulates troubling memories of the past. No matter how much Charlie grows intellectually, he is still profoundly influenced by his past limitations. He understands why the old Charlie was taught to keep away from women, and no matter how much he changes, he is unable to overcome the fear instilled in him as a child. For Charlie, sex has been associated with punishment, making it impossible for him to have an adult relationship until he resolves that conflict.

Charlie is beginning to understand the complexities of the problems that surround him. When confronted with Gimpy's theft, Charlie at first seeks out authority figures to tell him what to do. When he realizes that there are no simple "rules" to dictate his actions, but that he has to make his own moral judgments, he makes an important achievement in both his intellectual and emotional growth. This tells us that while Charlie may not yet be

able to have adult relationships, he has the potential to develop them, since he is now capable of reconciling difficult conflicts.

However, the character of Fanny Birden, one of the bakery employees, is used again to warn of the potential dangers of "eating from the Tree of Knowledge." It doesn't matter to Fanny whether Charlie has made a deal with the devil or with science—Charlie has tampered with nature, and the result is a change in him from a good, honest, if simple, man to someone whose intellect is so unnaturally high as to be frightening. This presents a new concern: that Charlie is in danger of losing his humanity. This is somewhat reminiscent of *Frankenstein*, in which a scientist creates from dead bodies a human being who is so isolated by what has been done to him that he can only be perceived as a monster.

Progress Report 12

Progress Report 12 Summary

For the next two weeks, Charlie does not write, telling Nemur he is too busy thinking and reading. The memories are coming back with astonishing clarity. In one, his sister comes home from school with an A on a history test and asks their mother for the dog she was promised if she did well. Charlie offers to help her take care of the dog, but she resents him and does not want to share. Because she refuses to share, their father will not let her have the dog and Norma angrily storms off, promising to go dumb like Charlie.

Charlie's relationship with Alice remains platonic, but he still likes to talk to her when he is trying to sort things out. One evening, he goes to pick her up from the Beekman School. Unable to resist, he goes inside and sees his old classmates. One of the young women says he talks like a big shot now. Alice is angry, finally telling him that he is not the person he used to be, and he does not treat people the same way. After a while, she admits the real cause of her upset: with his IQ now at 185, Charlie has simply surpassed her. She cannot keep up with his conversations, and she always goes home feeling dull. Instead of feeling like Charlie is getting smarter, she feels like she is getting dumber. She decides not to go with him to the conference in Chicago, where the team is presenting an interim report on the experiment. Initially angry, Charlie realizes he is relieved. His feelings for Alice have gone from worship to love to fondness, and finally to responsibility. Now he feels free.

In Central Park, he meets a woman who offers to go home with him. Charlie waits for the familiar feelings of panic, and when they do not come, he wonders how far he can go. But when she reveals she's five months pregnant, he has a sudden image of the middle-aged woman who'd flashed him, and then of his mother, when she was pregnant with Norma. He tells her what she is doing is filthy and grabs her shoulder. She screams. Charlie runs off, as an angry mob assembles to chase her attacker. Trapped in the park, he nevertheless manages to evade them. Thinking about it later, Charlie has the feeling he wanted to be caught and beaten. He does not understand why he should want to be punished, but shadows from the past grab at him, dragging him down.

Progress Report 12 Analysis

Fanny Birden's dire warning in the last progress report is beginning to come true. Charlie's intelligence is so high now that he is even isolated from Alice. Having lost his most compelling human bond, Charlie moves into the anonymous city streets, feeling free. However, he isn't free; he's completely alone, outside of society, and, haunted by a confusing mixture of memories, he frightens a woman in the park and is chased like a monster through the dark.

Progress Report 13

Progress Report 13 Summary

On June 10, Charlie flies to Chicago with Professor Nemur, Burt and Dr. Strauss for the conference for the International Psychological Association. Burt gives him a tape recorder so he can dictate his reports right up to the time of the presentation, when they intend to play some excerpts. Charlie buckles his seatbelt, hating the feeling of being trapped. Then he remembers his parents taking him to a doctor, when he was five or so, who said he might be able to make Charlie smart. His parents argued over the money; his father, Matt, worked ten-hour days selling barbershop supplies, while his mother spent every dime on quacks for Charlie. This doctor, Guarino, straps Charlie to a machine that roars like an airplane. It does not hurt, but it panics Charlie, and he soils himself. The doctor is nice to him, but his mother is furious—Charlie has embarrassed her again. The doctor tells her not to punish Charlie, but to bring him back twice a week. Charlie thinks he should probably resent Guarino, who was a quack and took advantage of his mother's unrealistic hopes, but the doctor always treated him like a human being, which is more than he can say for Nemur and the others.

Rather, Nemur treats Charlie like a specimen, resenting it when people at the conference ask Charlie questions about the topics he has been studying. Only when one asks about what caused Charlie's retardation does Charlie turn the conversation to Professor Nemur. Nemur then lectures about the "competitive inhibition of enzymes" until Charlie asks him about a recent report from the *Hindu Journal of Psychopathology*, which challenges Nemur's conclusions. Nemur is not familiar with the report, since it is too new to have been translated. Charlie, who has developed an expertise in linguistics and now speaks a number of languages, is surprised that Nemur's knowledge is so narrow. Annoyed, he stalks off, out into the streets.

Burt follows, telling him he should be more tolerant of Nemur and the others. He reminds Charlie that they are not geniuses, but ordinary men, and they never pretended to be otherwise. Charlie realizes he has to "guard against the natural tendency to look down on them" now that he has surpassed them.

At the presentation, Charlie's resentment returns. He feels like a sideshow. He and Algernon, in his cage on Charlie's lap, are presented as creations of Professor Nemur and his team. The audience laughs at his old, vacuous expression, and his early responses to the maze. Charlie has the urge to set Algernon free, but restrains himself as he listens to the papers. From Burt's presentation, he learns that Algernon's behavior has become erratic; sometimes he refuses to work, while sometimes he will run the maze but then fling himself against the cage instead of taking his reward.

In his own paper, Nemur describes Charlie as having been "outside of society, alone in a great city without friends or relatives to care about him, without the mental equipment to live a normal life." He had "no past, no contact with the present, no hope for the

future." When Nemur concludes that Charlie did not even exist until now, Charlie realizes what has been bothering him so much: Nemur has made a mistake in his calculation of the waiting period. They need more time to determine if the results are permanent. But Nemur continues: "In place of a feeble-minded shell, a burden on the society that must fear his irresponsible behavior, we have a man of dignity and sensitivity, ready to take his place as a contributing member of society."

Charlie's fury overwhelms him. Nemur invites him to say a few words, but instead of speaking, Charlie lets Algernon out of the cage. The mouse runs off, creating chaos in the auditorium. Everyone chases after him, eventually splitting into two teams to comb the hotel. Charlie finds him in the ladies' room, staring at himself in the mirror. Charlie puts him in his pocket and, while the others continue searching, goes back to his room, packs, and leaves the hotel.

He flies back to New York alone, thinking he should not panic, that just because Nemur made a mistake does not mean the changes are not permanent. However, he might have less time than he thought, and he wants to see his parents.

Progress Report 13 Analysis

The conference in Chicago presents another turning point for Charlie. He has been haunted by the notion that no one treated the old, pre-surgery Charlie as a human being—that because of his low intelligence, he was seen as less of a person. This was first made clear when Charlie went to Professor Nemur for advice on Gimpy's theft and Professor Nemur told him he couldn't be culpable because of his own ignorance. This was not a good excuse to Charlie, who believed that if he failed to accept some blame it would make him less than human. This is an important association—an acknowledgment that people are responsible not only for their own behavior but also for their responses to the behavior of others.

Now, at the conference, Professor Nemur introduces Charlie as his own creation, which implies that Charlie had no existence before Professor Nemur changed him. While Alice has impressed on Charlie that because of the experiment he has a responsibility to Professor Nemur and the rest of the world, Charlie is struggling to define and maintain his own identity, a task complicated by the fact that he increasingly sees a distinction between his present identity as a genius and his former identity as a "moron." The only common thread is one of humanity—both Charlies were human beings, who deserved to be treated with respect.

At the same time, however, Charlie finds himself falling prey to the same tendencies toward prejudice that caused others to abuse him—it is difficult for him to accept and forgive the limitations of the scientists who hold his future in their hands. As in *Frankenstein*, the creation rebels against the creator, and Charlie runs away from Professor Nemur and the others, determined to develop his identity on his own, an identity separate from their intentions for him. Key to understanding himself is seeing his parents again, and resolving all the conflicts left over from his childhood. The fact that

he now knows his high intelligence may not be permanent gives his search a new urgency and speeds the pace of the story as it nears a conclusion.

Progress Report 14

Progress Report 14 Summary

The escape hits the papers the next day. Charlie finds an article about his mother and sister, who request any information on his whereabouts. In the article, Norma says she had thought her brother was dead until her permission was requested for the surgery. There is a picture of Norma and Rose, sitting together on the couch. Norma looks like their mother, and although Charlie can see his mother's face clearly in the picture, it is obscured for him by the haze of memories. He recalls lying in bed one night, filled with an instinctive fear as his parents argued in the other room. His mother wanted him sent away so Norma could have a normal life. Remembering, Charlie hates his mother. He never knew what to expect from her. He wanted comfort but was afraid of being slapped. Once his sister was born, her attitude toward him changed completely. She was no longer insistent that he was normal. She turned cold. His sister's intelligence had reassured her that Charlie's retardation was not her fault, and now she was afraid he would somehow rub off on Norma and ruin her. Charlie wishes he could reach back in time and reassure the old Charlie that he was not bad and did not do anything wrong. He wishes he could let his mother know how much she hurt him.

Charlie uses his savings to move into a furnished apartment, where he builds a maze for Algernon in a spare bedroom. He finds he does not need to bribe Algernon with food to solve the problems; learning is apparently its own reward. Algernon is a good companion, eating pretzels, sipping beer and watching baseball with him.

Charlie's neighbor is Fay Lillman, a pretty, uninhibited artist who lounges in her underwear. She is good-hearted and vibrant, a gust of life Charlie sorely needs. Her apartment is a shambles, while Charlie has felt compelled for the first time in his life to keep everything in a compulsive kind of order. She kids him about his straight lines and boxes, suggesting he melt away the lines. She likes Algernon, too, and frequently comes over using the connecting fire escape.

Meanwhile, Charlie tracks his father, Matt, to a barber shop in the Bronx, where he has been since he left Charlie's mother. His father does not recognize him, and Charlie tells him he is about to meet someone he has not seen in a long time and he wants to look his best. As Matt cuts his hair, shaves him and covers his eyes with cotton soaked in witch hazel, Charlie recalls waking up to his mother's shrieking. His father is there, trying to soothe her, but Rose is hysterical, using her hysteria as she always did to get her way. Matt tells her to put down the knife, but she says Charlie is better off dead, since he will never be able to live a normal life. Matt agrees to take him to Herman's until they can work something out, and then he comes into Charlie's room and dresses him. Charlie does not know what is happening, but he is afraid, and as they pass the kitchen table, he sees a carving knife. He senses his mother wanted to hurt him, but she is avoiding his eyes.

In the barbershop, Matt has finished, but he still does not recognize his son. Charlie wants to say something, but has no idea what to say. He realizes he wants his father's approval, has come to see that same look on his face as he had seen when he learned to tie his shoes. However, he isn't that Charlie anymore. He is not Matt's son. Fighting a sudden overwhelming nausea, he pays and leaves the shop.

All the time he is on his own, Charlie thinks about Alice, but keeps himself from calling her. When Fay makes it clear she's attracted to him, Charlie thinks maybe she's right for him, at this emotional level. When he starts to kiss her, he suddenly sees the two of them, as if he is a third person watching from a distance. It leaves him unresponsive. He tells Fay he does not feel well, but she plies him with gin. In the morning, Charlie wakes up in bed with her, not remembering a thing. She tells him nothing happened, but that he had acted very weird, dancing around like a confused kid. She said he kept telling her he could not play with her because his mother would take away his peanuts and put him in a cage. She had been a little afraid for him, so she'd stayed over.

Charlie wanders the streets on a kind of anti-intellectual binge, soaking up popular movies and realizing finally that he is craving human contact. He goes to the diner, where he sees a retarded man drop a pile of dishes. Everyone laughs, and Charlie gets up and yells, reminding them that the young man is a human being. He stalks out, angry with them and angry with himself. Not so long ago they had been laughing at him, but he had almost forgotten. Now he can see that unknowingly he had joined them in laughing at himself. He decides he has been childish to focus all his energy on his past and future, when there is so much he could do for other people. He decides to get in touch with the Welberg Foundation, to see if they will let him do some independent work.

He also realizes he cannot solve his problems alone. He needs to be with someone who cares about him. He calls Alice, who is happy to hear from him. In her apartment, he finds himself pouring out all his pent-up thoughts and emotions. He feels he has been separated emotionally from everyone and everything, and he has realized that the old Charlie still exists—he is not gone. Rather, he's been waiting and watching from the wings, and it's the old Charlie, the "little boy who's afraid of women because of things his mother did to him" who's kept him from getting close to Alice.

Although he is unable to have a physical relationship with Alice, Charlie is able to finally have one with Fay. Although the old Charlie watches them at first, he does not interfere. Charlie begins spending his nights with Fay, staying out late dancing and drinking. He spends his days on his personal projects, which he wants to finish before returning to the lab. He feels an urgency that is echoed in Algernon's increasingly erratic behavior. One day, Fay brings Algernon a female companion, but later, after he bites Fay's finger, they find the female mouse hiding, with a gash in her chest. Charlie does not want to make a snap judgment, but he knows he has to get Algernon back to the lab.

Progress Report 14 Analysis

Charlie is increasingly plagued by an awareness of his old self, the low-I.Q. Charlie, as a distinctly separate individual inside him, one he is able to defy well enough to begin a physical relationship with a woman but not with Alice, the woman he loves. The old Charlie's fears are too strong to allow him to consummate his love for Alice, and Charlie knows that will remain the case until he resolves his feelings for his mother. He now remembers his mother as a mercurial woman desperate to believe he was normal until the birth of his sister reassured her that his retardation wasn't a product of her own defective genes. Her alternating coldness and violence outbursts have left him incapable of being physically close to any woman who actually means something to him, and he cannot help but hate her for it. He hopes to reacquaint himself with his father, but after meeting Matt, he realizes that his old hope of winning his family back by becoming smart was a futile one. In increasing his intelligence, he ceased to be the Charlie of whom his father might have been proud.

Feeling his own isolation, Charlie wanders the streets until he realizes that he really needs human contact. Running away has not solved his problems; rather, the only way to solve them is with people who care about him. He also comes to realize that he does have, as Alice maintained, an obligation to other people like him—people of low I.Q. who hope to have their intelligence increased by surgery. Even if the experiment ultimately proves a failure, he can make it a success by using his intelligence to discover the problems in it. Charlie thus begins to reclaim his humanity, which will ultimately end his isolation. Unfortunately, Algernon's erratic and violent behavior suggests time is running out.

Progress Report 15

Progress Report 15 Summary

On July 12, Charlie is received by a cold, but cordial, Professor Nemur, who resents the fact that Charlie went over his head in contacting the Welberg Foundation directly. Nemur can do nothing, and he tells Charlie the lab and all its resources are at his disposal.

Burt observess Algernon in his original maze, finding that the mouse has forgotten a lot. Most of his complex responses are gone and he is no longer able to figure out simple patterns. They decide to give him time to get used to the lab again.

In the meantime, Burt familiarizes Charlie with the lab, taking him through section by section. Although Charlie knows the lab, he now has to absorb the procedures it has taken the others years to learn. They get to the door of the incinerator room, where the dead animals are frozen and then cremated. Charlie tells him he does not want Algernon to go in there, whenever the time comes. He will take care of Algernon himself.

Then he asks Professor Nemur what provisions were made for him. He knew before, in a vague way, that he would be sent back to the Warren Home if the experiment went wrong, but now he wants to know everything, while he is still capable of understanding and making decisions. Professor Nemur again explains the risks—that Charlie might regress to a level of intelligence even lower than before. In that case, he would not be able to care for himself, and he would have to be sent to Warren. He might not be able to work as he had done before, or live outside the home. The Foundation had set up enough money for him so that he would be cared for the rest of his life.

Charlie asks Nemur to set up a tour of Warren for him. He says he has to know what is going to happen while he is still in control. Professor Nemur is disturbed by the idea, as if Charlie is ordering his own coffin to sit in before he dies. Charlie doesn't expect him to understand: "I can't blame him because he doesn't realize that finding out who I really am—the meaning of my total existence involves knowing the possibilities of my future as well as my past, where I'm going as well as where I've been. Although we know the end of the maze holds death…I see now that the path I choose through that maze makes me what I am. I am not only a thing, but also a way of being—one of many ways—and knowing the paths I have followed and the ones left to take will help me understand what I am becoming."

Progress Report 15 Analysis

In asking to tour Warren, Charlie recognizes that the meaning of his life relies on the total of his experiences, both good and bad. He associates being sent to Warren with death, and prepares for it as a person might prepare for the end of a terminal illness.

The reason for this becomes clear in the next progress report. For now, Charlie focuses on using his remaining time as effectively as possible.

Progress Report 16

Progress Report 16 Summary

Charlie visits the Warren State Home and Training School on July 14. It is a large complex of buildings that houses 4,000 people destined to spend their natural lives there. The patients are divided into two groups—tidy and untidy, with the untidy being the ones who are so severely brain-damaged that they cannot do even basic things for themselves like use the bathroom. Charlie morbidly wonders into which category he will.

He meets the head psychologist, Mr. Winslow, who gives him a tour of the facility. Mr. Winslow does not know Charlie's history and introduces him as a member of Beekman University. Although it becomes clear that the staff of Warren is an eclectic group of people, who are devoted to the patients whom they see as their children, the visit depresses Charlie. At one point, Mr. Winslow snaps at him that he would not know what it was like for the patients or staff, being locked away in his ivory tower.

Algernon now refuses to run the maze or eat, and But has to force-feed him. Seeing Algernon this way upsets Charlie, and he tries to spend some time with Fay. Unfortunately, Fay has become increasingly possessive, and jealous of his work. One night, Charlie brings Alice to the apartment, and Fay appears. To Charlie's surprise, the two women take to each other. Later, Alice tells him she had expected to hate Fay, but she had not. It is clear to Alice that Fay loves Charlie, and Alice thinks she's good for him. Her only concern is the drinking, which Alice is afraid will interfere with his work. Charlie denies any love between him and Fay, saying Alice is the only woman he has ever loved. The old Charlie will not let him make love to her, so it seems impossible.

By the end of July, Charlie has moved a cot into the lab, where he spends almost all of his time. His perceptions are sharper, more clear, than they've ever been before, and he works feverishly at solving the problem Nemur missed: "They all think I'm killing myself at this pace, but what they don't understand is that I'm living at a peak of clarity and beauty I never knew existed. Every part of me is attuned to the work." At night, the ideas explode, and during the day, he is filled with joy and energy.

While he is away, Fay gets a new boyfriend, but Charlie does not blame her. He can sense the solution to the problem just out of reach, and decides if he lets it stew a while his brain will work it out. In the meantime, he goes to a cocktail party Mrs. Nemur throws for the men on the board of the Welberg Foundation who had gotten her husband the grant. Charlie does not like Mrs. Nemur, who makes it plain she is suspicious of his work. Afraid it will undermine her husband's ability to get the credit for the project, she takes the opportunity to point out that Charlie could not have helped, a few months ago.

Charlie drinks too much and gets into an argument with Professor Nemur, who is tired of Charlie's arrogant behavior. Charlie tells him that none of them cared about him as a person, before or after the surgery. All he has ever been is a lab specimen, the moron-

genius guinea pig. Professor Nemur tells him to stop feeling sorry for himself, and that the experiment was not intended to make him popular. He says Charlie should be grateful for what has been done for him, but instead he has turned "from a likable, retarded young man into an arrogant, self-centered, antisocial bastard." Charlie is grateful, but he tells Nemur that the problem is that the professor wanted someone "who could be made intelligent but still be kept in a cage and displayed when necessary to reap the honors…" Nemur has done everything but treat Charlie as a human being, saying repeatedly that Charlie was nothing before the surgery. He says he is an individual now, just as he was then, and a person with an I.Q. of less than 100 deserves the same consideration as anyone else. Nemur tells him he has become cynical, but Charlie responds: "Here in your university, intelligence, education, knowledge, have all become great idols. But I know now there's one thing you've all overlooked: intelligence and education that hasn't been tempered by human affection isn't worth a damn… Intelligence is one of the greatest human gifts. But all too often a search for knowledge drives out the search for love."

He goes on to say that intelligence without affection leads to mental and moral breakdown, and that the exclusion of human relationships leads to violence and pain. He says before the surgery he had friends, but now he does not have anyone who means anything to him, not as he had at the bakery. His words begin to slur, and his language regresses until he's finally speaking childishly, saying he's always tried to do the right things, and that his mother taught him to be nice to people. He is now outside himself, watching the old Charlie in his body, twisting and writhing with the need to go to the bathroom. He shoves his body to the restroom, where he looks at his reflection in the mirror. He sees the old Charlie, knowing he wants to come back. It is the old Charlie's body and brain, and Charlie knows he has no right to it. However, he admits he doesn't want to give it back, because restoring the old Charlie would mean destroying himself. For a long moment, he can see himself through Charlie's eyes. Professor Nemur was right; he has become an arrogant, self-centered person incapable of making friends. He leaves the party, feeling ashamed.

Near the end of August, the solution comes to Charlie and he writes a letter to Professor Nemur and the Welberg Foundation, stating, "Artificially-induced intelligence deteriorates at a rate of time proportional to the quantity of increase." His calculations have proven that his brain will inevitably deteriorate—soon. In his letter, he asks that no one be blamed for the failure, repeating something Dr. Strauss had said in Chicago: "an experimental failure, the *disproving* of a theory, [is] as important to the advancement of learning as a success…" He expresses his gratitude for the opportunity he has been given to advance the science.

By the middle of September, Nemur's people have confirmed Charlie's results, and Charlie is growing increasingly absent-minded and short-tempered. On September 15, Algernon dies. Charlie finds him stretched out on his side in a corner of his cage. A dissection shows a decrease in the weight of his brain, as well as a "smoothing out of the cerebral convolutions" and a "deepening and broadening of brain fissures." Charlie buries Algernon in the back yard and puts wild flowers on the grave.

Near the end of the month, Charlie goes to see his mother. He finds her aged and senile, drifting in and out of the past. She is scrubbing the windows of the poor, broken-down building, keeping up appearances as always. Charlie has an image of himself, on the other side of that window, looking out.

At first, Rose is terrified of him, and Charlie can't force himself to speak, except to make childish noises that sound like "Ma." Finally, he is able to talk to her, and show her that the doctors made him normal. He gives her a copy of a scientific paper he is publishing on the effect causing his brain to deteriorate, which he has named the "Algernon-Gordon Effect." It's proof he's finally made his mark on the world, just as she always wanted. Her pride rids him of the pain of the past. Charlie can see that his mother is in a hell of her own. She has no money and is dependent on Norma; they are struggling to pay the bills, while Rose drifts in and out of reality. Most of her life has been painful, and it is enough for Charlie to see her smile, and to know he put it there.

Rose has drifted back into her own world, scrubbing the floor and humming happily to herself, when Norma arrives. Charlie expects her to hate him, but is surprised at her warm reception. She says she has been expecting him, ever since she heard about the escape from Chicago. She is happy to see him, excited to have a big brother again, and one who's famous. Charlie asks her about some of his memories, and she tries to remember. As she begins to realize that she was the cause for his being sent away, Charlie realizes how hard it must have been for her growing up, always teased about him, always working hard, though Charlie was the one who got all the attention. Now she has the burden of their mother's senility.

Norma is devastated by the thought that Charlie was sent away because of her. She hugs him, but Rose jumps up and screams at him to get away from her. She grabs a knife, accusing him of touching Norma, saying he does not belong with normal people. Norma gets the knife away from her, but Charlie wonders if he ever did anything to actually justify his mother's accusations, maybe something that he has been unable to face. Norma does not give any indication of it, and when he sees her trembling, Charlie tells her not to worry about it. He does not have the heart to tell her what will happen to him, and promises to send money and visit when he can.

Progress Report 16 Analysis

At Warren, Charlie realizes that there are people who care deeply for the mentally handicapped, though it is difficult for him to reconcile himself to a fate among the patients who, for the time being, are so different from him. Ironically, he is accused of prejudice by the administrator.

In his argument with Professor Nemur, Charlie makes perhaps his most profound point: that intelligence without human affection can only lead to pain and destruction. Looking in the restroom mirror, he also realizes that he has borrowed a life to which he has no right. The old Charlie Gordon, no matter what his I.Q., was a kind and likable person who had every right to the life that was taken by the experimental surgery. He knows

now that the old Charlie is not gone, but has been waiting behind the glass to reclaim his life. Mirrors and windows have been a subtle symbol throughout the story, as Charlie has always felt one of his two identities trapped on the other side of the glass—the restroom mirror, for example, or the window at his childhood home as he looked out at the world that didn't include him. Even Algernon seemed to sense this duality, when Charlie found him staring into the Ladies' Room mirror at the hotel.

Although the new Charlie instinctively rebels against his own destruction, he is also grateful now for the opportunity he has had to use his borrowed time to contribute something positive to the world. This time has also given him the tools and the opportunity to finally confront his mother, whom he finds a senile old woman trapped in her own nightmarish reality, composed of a mixture of past and present fears. Seeing his mother tormented by her own demons frees Charlie from his own, forming the climax to the story as he reconciles with his family to become a whole and healed human being. From this point forward, Charlie will steadily deteriorate.

Progress Report 17

Progress Report 17 Summary

As Charlie deteriorates through the months of October and November, he has thoughts of suicide, but knows he has no right to deny the other Charlie his existence. He becomes increasingly angry, blowing up at Burt and Dr. Strauss, and fighting with his neighbors. Fay is afraid of him and tells him to stay away from her.

In a therapy session with Dr. Strauss in early October, Charlie tries to explain the visions, or hallucinations, he has been having. As he talks, he feels the familiar cold tingling, and then he is out of his body, drifting upwards over the planet. He feels the atoms of his body hurtling away from each other, but the old Charlie is pulling him back. The old Charlie is afraid of dying, and Charlie waits as his spirit shrinks back to earthly dimensions. Then he is shrinking into a kind of fusion of all the atoms that make up his "self," like a flower "*un*multiplying, *un*dividing itself back from the many toward one." At the end of the vision, he is in a cave, the walls pressing against him, pushing him toward a light. There is pain and blinding light, coldness and buzzing, and he flails in the air and screams.

Charlie refuses to take any more tests, finding that he can no longer complete the mazes or remember what he is supposed to find in the inkblots for the Rorschach tests. It is too painful for him to try, and he leaves the lab for good.

Alice comes to see him, and Charlie finds that the barriers have finally broken down. His intelligence is at roughly the same level as hers, and the panic he once felt with her is gone. They finally consummate their relationship, and it is a spiritual experience that Charlie can only compare with his vision in Dr. Strauss' office. Alice moves in, keeping house and cooking for him, and promising to leave when Charlie tells her to. Meanwhile, he decides to keep reading, hoping that if he can continue to learn new things, he might end up gaining as much as he loses, like standing still on an escalator.

Alice stays for two weeks. Charlie grows increasingly irritable, lashing out at her. He breaks records and tears up books he can no longer understand, and he gets furious with Alice for putting the pieces in boxes. He wants to see the evidence of his deterioration, so he can try to remember. He soon sinks into epic T.V.-watching, no longer wanting to think. Alice leaves books out for him and tries to talk to him about the news, but Charlie's afraid she is humoring him, or pitying him—still trying to play the schoolteacher. She talks around issues and he cannot understand or keep up with the conversation. In their final argument, Alice tries to tell him that before he had the operation, he did not wallow in self-pity or snap at people. There was something about him that people respected. He was warm and laughed at himself. However, Charlie doesn't feel like laughing at himself now.

He wanders the streets but gets lost and a policeman has to bring him home. Another man asks if he wants a girl, and Charlie follows him and gives him ten dollars, but the man disappears. He loses his check from the Welberg Foundation. His landlady, Mrs. Mooney, brings him chicken soup, and eventually Dr. Strauss and Alice give Mrs. Mooney money to pay Charlie's rent and buy his food. As the deterioration of Charlie's brain progresses, his journal entries become shorter, simpler and more repetitive, with poor spelling, grammar and punctuation. Though he is desperate to keep his memories, his perception becomes increasingly vague.

He does not like people paying for him, so he gets his old job back at the bakery. Mr. Donner, Gimpy, and the others welcome him back warmly after he tells Mr. Donner the whole story. They have hired a new guy, who twists his arm and frightens him so badly he soils himself, which infuriates the others, who come to Charlie's defense. They offer to get rid of the guy, but Charlie, thinking of his wife and kid, asks them to give him another chance. One day, having forgotten he no longer goes to Miss Kinnian's class, he takes his seat in the classroom and tells her he lost his book. She runs out of the room crying, and Charlie remembers some things about the operation and thinks he really pulled a Charlie Gordon this time. He leaves before she comes back.

He does not want Miss Kinnian to feel sorry for him, and he knows everyone at the bakery feels sorry for him, so Charlie decides to go to Warren, where no one will know he was once a genius. He'll be like everyone else and make friends, and he takes a couple of books with him, thinking even if he can't read them he'll practice, and maybe he'll even get a little smarter than he was before the operation.

In his final entry of November 21, Charlie asks Miss Kinnian not to feel sorry for him. He says he's grateful for the glimpse he got of all the things he did, and he's grateful he knows about his family now, and that he was always a person like everyone else. He remembers a little about the book with the torn cover, and when he concentrates he can think of the man who tore it, a man who looks like him but is different, like Charlie's seeing him from the window. He says he bets he is the first dumb person in the world who found out something important for science, and he is going to keep trying to get smart. If he could, he would read all the time. He ends by telling Professor Nemur not to be a grouch when people laugh at him, because he would have more friends, and he asks the reader to put some flowers on Algernon's grave.

Progress Report 17 Analysis

Although Charlie loses his high I.Q., he retains the most important lesson he learned: that he was always a person who loved and deserved to be loved. Just as important, he knows *how* to love and be loved. Before his final deterioration, he is able to consummate his relationship with Alice in a physical and emotional connection that he recognizes as the height of human experience. Although he does not remember the details of their relationship, he continues to care for her, and understands that his presence causes her pain. With his old optimism, he moves himself to Warren, where he will be surrounded by people like him. The high-I.Q. Charlie is now a ghost in the

window of his mind, gone but not entirely forgotten. Ironically, the ending seems a happy one, in which Charlie will finally find friends who will be able to accept him as he is.

Characters

Algernon

The mouse who was the first subject of the surgery which raised Charlie's intelligence. Charlie forms a close emotional bond with the mouse, who is the only other creature to have had its intelligence artificially raised. Its experiences, and fate, parallel Charlie's.

Fanny Birden

An older woman who works at the bakery with Charlie and who is the only employee who does not sign a petition demanding Charlie's resignation after his IQ is raised. She compares the change in Charlie's intelligence to Adam and Eve eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and wishes that Charlie "could go back to being the good simple man you was before."

Joe Carp

One of Charlie's coworkers at the bakery. and, with Frank Reilly, one of his chief tormentors.

Mr. Arthur Donner

The owner of the bakery where Charlie works, Mr. Donner is a friend of Charlie's Uncle Herman and gave Charlie his job there. Unlike many others at the bakery, he treats Charlie decently, if condescendingly.

Gimpy

A worker at Donner's bakery who treats Charlie better than many of the other workers do. However, Gimpy is the cause of one of the post-operative Charlie's first major crises when Charlie sees him stealing from the cash register. When Charlie confronts him about stealing, Gimpy says, "I always stood up for you. I should of had my head examined."

Charlie Gordon

The narrator and central character of *Flowers for Algernon,* Charlie Gordon is a 32-year-old man with an IQ of 68. As a child, Charlie had a father who loved him and tried to take care of him, but he was abused by his mother, an emotionally unstable woman. His mother at first refused to admit that there was anything "wrong" with Charlie and beat

him when he did not perform up to the standards of other children. When Charlie's sister was born with normal intelligence, his mother admitted his handicap but became obsessed with the fear that Charlie would harm his sister-especially, that he would sexually molest her. This unreasoning fear led Charlie's mother to violently repress any display of sexuality on Charlie's part and, eventually, to threaten to kill him if he was not removed from their home.

This pattern of childhood abuse marked the adult Charlie in two significant ways: with repressed sexuality and with a strong desire to learn.

It was the latter that led him to take night classes at the Beekman School and which led to his being accepted as a subject for an operation that would raise his intelligence. Before the operation, Charlie is perceived as a "good. simple man" and a "likeable, retarded young man." His main goal in undergoing the operation is "to be smart like other pepul so I can have lots of friends who like me."

However, once Charlie attains normal intelligence, he sees that many people he thought were his friends were actually ridiculing and abusing him, and once he attains a genius IQ, he finds himself as remote and alienated from other people as he had been previously. He struggles to deal with the emotions he now has the intellect to recognize, but which his intellect alone cannot control. He also works to recover and come to terms with memories of His childhood. Through it all, Charlie's main desire is what it always has been: to be treated as a human being and to be able to establish satisfactory relationships with other human beings.

Although Charlie demonstrates some character flaws after his intelligence peaks, such as arrogance and self-absorption, he is basically a good man. When he realizes that the surgical procedure is flawed, he throws himself into research to discover the flaw, feeling that if his efforts contribute at all to "the possibility of helping others like myself, I will be satisfied." When he finally determines that nothing can be done to prevent his return to his pre-operative state, he does what he can to come to terms with his family and those around him, and they in turn recognize his worth as a human being. Even after Charlie returns to his previous subnormal level of intelligence, he has learned to be understanding of the failings of others because they are "not so smart like you once thot they were." Although the experiment has failed, Charlie Gordon has not.

Matt Gordon

Charlie's father, a salesman of barbershop supplies. He is basically a kind man who loves his son and tries to protect him but who is consistently overpowered by His wife: first, by her hysterical denial that Charlie is handicapped, and then by her equally hysterical conviction that Charlie is a danger to their daughter. When Rose threatens to kill Charlie, Matt takes Charlie to his Uncle Herman, who offers Charlie a refuge. Years later, Matt finally leaves Rose and opens his own barbershop. When the adult Charlie seeks him out, he does not recognize his son.

Norma Gordon

Charlie's sister. Charlie's memory of her is of a "spoiled brat" who hated him and treated him badly. However, when the adult Charlie visits the adult Norma, who now has full-time care of their senile mother, he finds a grown woman who is "warm and sympathetic and affectionate." She genuinely regrets her youthful hostility towards her brother, and wants to reestablish contact with him.

Rose Gordon

Charlie's mother. She is an emotionally unstable woman who was largely unable to cope with having a mentally handicapped child. During Charlie's early childhood, she refused to admit that he was anything other than "normal" and beat him when he was unable to perform at the same level as other children. After Charlie's sister Norma was born without mental handicaps, Rose quit trying to make Charlie "normal" and became obsessed with "protecting" Norma from him. Eventually, Rose breaks down completely, declares that Norma is in danger of being sexually molested by Charlie, and threatens to kill him if he is not removed from their home. When Charlie reestablishes contact with his mother many years later, he discovers an old woman far gone into senility who barely recognizes her son.

Hilda

A nurse who attends Charlie immediately after the operation and who tells him that the scientists should not have altered his intelligence. She compares their action to Adam and Eve eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and being cast out of Eden.

Miss Alice Kinnian

Charlie Gordon's teacher at the Beekman University Center for Retarded Adults, the person who recommends Charlie for the procedure which raises his intelligence, and the woman Charlie loves. Alice is an intelligent and dedicated woman who takes a strong personal interest in Charlie and consistently treats him in a responsible and respectful manner. As Charlie's intelligence increases, she guides him as best she can; when he falls in love with her, she gently declines. However, they maintain a close friendship, and Alice eventually finds herself returning Charlie's feelings, only to discover that the traumas of his past prevent him from making love to her. She remains his friend, despite the increasing distance his towering intelligence places between them. When the operation finally fails and Charlie enters his decline, they are finally able to have a romantic relationship. Alice tries her best to stick by Charlie, even when he pushes her away, but when he is finally back where he began, with an IQ of 68, she is forced to admit that he is lost to her and that she has to go on with her life.

Fay Lillman

A free-spirited artist who lives across the hall from Charlie when he "disappears" in New York. When Charlie first sees her painting in her underwear, she thinks nothing of it, and she does not hesitate to crawl along a window ledge to get to Charlie's apartment. Charlie eventually enters into a sexual relationship with her, although he does not love her, and she provides Charlie with a whirlwind social life of drinking, dancing, and having a good time. Although she evidently feels genuine affection for Charlie, she is uninterested in his research, perhaps In part because she does not know that Charlie has had his intelligence artificially raised. When Charlie moves into the lab because Fay is interfering with his work, she loses interest in him and drifts away.

Bertha Nemur

Professor Harold Nemur's wife. An ambitious woman who used her father's influence to get Professor Nemur the grant that funded his research and who is constantly pressuring her husband to excel and produce great results. According to Burt Selden, she is why Nemur is "under tension all the time, even when things are going well ..."

Professor Harold Nemur

The psychologist who developed the theories behind the operation which raised Charlie's intelligence. Nemur is a brilliant scientist but egotistical and ambitious, the latter stemming partially from pressures from his wife. He is eager to establish his reputation as the discoverer of the process that made Charlie a genius and rushes to make the results of the experiment public, against the advice of the other scientists working on the project. He does not initially want Charlie to be the subject of the experiment, and after Charlie's IQ is raised, relations between the two are often strained, as Charlie's intelligence eventually exceeds Nemur's. This hostility culminates in a shouting match between the two during which Charlie accuses Nemur of treating him as less than a human being and Nemur accuses Charlie of having become "arr0gant, self-centered," and "antisocial".

Frank Reilly

One of Charlie's coworkers at the bakery, and, with Joe Carp, one of his chief tormentors.

Burt Seldon

A graduate student who assists Professor Nemur and Dr. Strauss. He is in charge of Charlie's psychological testing, and he treats Charlie in a more relaxed and friendly fashion than either of the senior scientists. It is through Burt that Charlie gets much of

his information about Nemur and Strauss, and it is Burt who suggests that the post-operative Charlie needs to develop "understanding" and "tolerance."

Dr. Strauss

Dr. Strauss, Professor Nemur's partner, is the neurosurgeon who performs the surgery that raises Charlie's IQ. He is more sympathetic to and concerned for Charlie than is Nemur. He advocates that Charlie be chosen for the experiment, intervenes when Charlie has a potentially violent confrontation with Nemur, and tries to look after Charlie when the effects of the experiment have finally worn off.

Thelma

A nurse at the Warren State Home who impresses Charlie by her devotion to her patients. Because he already knows he is regressing and could end up as a resident of Warren, Charlie wonders what it would be like to have her care for him.

Themes

Science and Technology

Relating the story of a mentally impaired man whose intelligence is increased through surgery and then lost, *Flowers for Algernon* touches on a number of literary themes. The most obvious of the novel's themes is the use and abuse of science and technology. The critic Mark R. Hillegas has identified *Flowers for Algernon* as the type of science fiction which deals with "problems imagined as resulting from inventions, discoveries, or scientific hypotheses" -in this case, a surgical procedure that can turn a person of subnormal intelligence into a genius. While the novel does not specifically take an anti-technology stance, it does make clear the limitations of technology as a "quick fix" to human problems--Charlie's operation is, ultimately, a failure in that he does not remain a genius. In a reversal of the classic notion of tragedy, the "flaw" which causes Charlie's downfall is not within him, but in the technology which sought to change him.

Knowledge and Ignorance

The idea that "there are some things humanity was not meant to know" may be traced in modern literature to Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818), and in some ways *Flowers for Algernon* contains echoes of Shelley's tale. The critic Thomas D. Clareson has directly connected Keyes's novel to *Frankenstein* in that Keyes combines the figures of the mad scientist and the "inhuman" creation into "the single figure of Charlie Gordon." This theme is further emphasized by the comments of Hilda, a nurse, and Fanny Birden, one of Charlie's coworkers, which compare his operation to the acquisition of forbidden knowledge in the Garden of Eden, which resulted in Adam and Eve being thrown out of Paradise.

However, *Flowers for Algernon* does not argue that humans should not try to attain knowledge, but rather that they should be conscious of the limitations of a purely intellectual approach to life. When Charlie buries himself in research to try to find the solution to the flaw in the operation, he declares, "I'm living at a peak of clarity and beauty I never knew existed." But later, during an argument with Professor Nemur, Charlie acknowledges that intelligence alone isn't enough: "intelligence and education isn't worth a damn ... all too often a search for knowledge drives out the search for love."

Alienation and Loneliness

In an early "progress report," Charlie writes that he wants to be smart "so I can have lots of friends who like me" Unfortunately, once he becomes a genius, he discovers that there are a whole new set of problems that prevent him from establishing satisfactory relationships with other people. He has substituted one sort of alienation for another, as the condescension and cruelty he once faced from humanity has been replaced by

misunderstanding, insensitivity, and fear. He falls in love with Alice Kinnian, the teacher who recommended him for the operation, but he realizes, "I am just as far away from Alice with an I.Q. of 185 as I was when I had an I.Q. of 70." Almost everything Charlie does in the novel is motivated by his desire to understand himself and establish functional relationships with others, perhaps most dramatically expressed when he wanders the streets of New York City by himself: "for a moment I brush against someone and sense the connection."

Atonement and Forgiveness

A major aspect of the novel is Charlie's efforts to understand and come to terms with the various people who have hurt him throughout his life: his mother, who physically and emotionally abused him; his father, who failed to defend him; his coworkers at the bakery, who brutalized him; the scientists who raised his intelligence but treated him like a laboratory animal. It is significant that when Charlie realizes the effects of the operation will not last, his major goal is to locate his family and establish some sort of peace with them. When he finally locates his mother, he tells himself, "I must understand the way she saw it. Unless I forgive her, I will have nothing." The tragedy of Charlie's fall from genius is relieved somewhat by the knowledge that he has come to terms with the people who mistreated him. In his last progress report, he writes, "if they make fun of you don't get sore because you remember their not so smart like you once thot they were."

Prejudice and Tolerance

Written during the height of the civil rights movement in the United States, *Flowers for Algernon* shows a profound concern with the rights of individuals to be treated as individuals, no matter what their condition in life. The early pages of the novel paint a grim portrait of how the mentally handicapped are treated, as Charlie is continually abused, verbally and physically, by his coworkers at the bakery. And when he becomes a genius, he is subject to a different sort of dehumanization, as the scientists in charge of the experiment regard him "as if I were some kind of newly created thing...No one... considered me an individual a human being." This is perhaps most dramatically expressed when, witnessing a slow-witted boy being ridiculed for breaking dishes in a restaurant, Charlie lashes out at the customers: "Leave him alone! He can't understand. He can't help what he is ... but for God's sake, have some respect! *He's a human being!"*

Sex

Although the novel is not primarily focused on sexual issues, a good deal of attention is paid to the fact that Charlie is sexually repressed as a result of an abused childhood. His mother, terrified that her "retarded" son would sexually assault his "normal" sister, violently repressed all normal displays of adolescent sexuality. The adult Charlie, once

his intelligence has been raised to where he can understand the issues involved, initially has difficulty establishing a sexual relationship with Fay Lillman, a neighbor who seeks out his company, and is unable to have a physical relationship with Alice Kinman, the woman he is in love with. Charlie's ability to have sex with Fay and, eventually, with Alice, is seen as an important step in overcoming past traumas and becoming a fully functional adult.

Style

Point of View

Keyes's remarkable use of first-person ("I") point of view is perhaps the most important source of *Flowers for Algernon's* narrative power. Charlie's journey from an IQ of 68 to one almost three times as high, and his fall back into subnormal intelligence, is told in the form of "Progress Reports" written by Charlie for the scientists conducting the experiment that raised his IQ. The reports before and soon after the operation are written ill nonstandard English, full of the kind of mistakes one would expect from writing by a mentally handicapped adult:

Dr Strauss says I should rite down what I think and remembir and evrey thing that happins to me from now on. I dont no why but he says its importint so they will see if they can use me.

As Charlie's intelligence grows, his reports become more and more literate and sophisticated'

I've got to realize that when they continually admonish me to speak and write simply so that people who read these reports will be able to understand me, they are talking about themselves as well.

The striking contrasts between the earlier and later entries, both in style and content, dramatize both the changes Charlie undergoes and the obstacles he must overcome. Even more dramatic is the contrast between the high-IQ entries and the final entries, when Charlie loses his intelligence and falls back into the semi-literacy of the earlier entries. Keyes's use of Charlie as the narrator makes the reader's experience of Charlie's inevitable fate more immediate and more moving, and shows that, as a reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* put it, Keyes "has the technical equipment to keep us from shrugging off the pain."

Foreshadowing

Another source of the novel's power is the inevitability of Charlie's fate, once we learn that the results of the experiment will not be permanent.

But even before we learn that the experiment has failed, Keyes offers several moments of foreshadowing, events which hint at what is to come. The most obvious of these center around Algernon the mouse, who has had the same operation as Charlie and whose progress and deterioration both mirrors and forecasts Charlie's own. When Algernon begins to grow restive, has trouble running the maze, and starts biting people, it does not bode well for Charlie. In addition, two minor characters-Hilda, a nurse, and Fanny Birden, one of Charlie's coworkers at the bakery-both invoke the story of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, which foreshadows Charlie's own "fall"

from genius. Charlie's trip to the Warren State Home while he still possesses heightened intelligence foreshadows what is in store when he finally loses that intelligence. And, in a more subtle moment early in the novel, as Charlie is on the operating table before the surgery, he tells Dr. Strauss that he's scared. When Dr. Strauss reassures him that he will 'just go to sleep,"_ Charlie replies, "that's what I'm skared about"-a foreshadowing, perhaps, of Charlie's later descent into darkness.

Setting

The setting of *Flowers for Algernon* is New York City, with a brief episode in Chicago, in the present or near future. Although the physical landscape and cultural background is not a major part of the novel, critic Robert Scholes has noted that the very normality and non-distinctiveness of the setting makes the one "different" element of the novel-the surgical procedure that raises Charlie's IQ-all the more distinctive And at one point in the novel, when Charlie has taken Algernon and is hiding out from the scientists, the crowded urban landscape of New York City becomes an important part of Charlie's attempts to come to terms with his situation' "on a hot night when everyone is out walking, or sitting in a theater, there is a rustling, and for a moment I brush against someone and sense the connection between the branch and trunk and the deep root."

Irony

Irony-the difference between the way things appear to be and the way they really are-plays an important part in *Flowers for Algernon.* Early in the novel, we see that Charlie's coworkers at the bakery, especially Joe Carp and Frank Reilly, are condescending and abusive towards him, insulting him to his face and playing cruel tricks on him. Charlie, however, writes that "Lots of people laff at me and their my friends and we have fun I cant wait to be smart like my best friends Joe Carp and Frank Reilly." Once Charlie becomes smart, he realizes that these people are not his friends, but he is then faced with another irony. Before the operation, he wanted "to be smart like other pepul so I can have lots of friends who like me." But his increased IQ causes the bakery workers to be afraid of him, the scientists who had been kindly and wise figures turn out to be limited human beings who see Charlie more as a laboratory experiment than a human being, and heightened intelligence is no help when he falls in love with Alice Kinman. As Charlie the genius notes, "Ironic that all my intelligence doesn't help me solve a problem like this." And in a final irony, when Charlie returns to his IQ of 68 and seeks his old job back, Joe and Frank, the men who had persecuted him before, defend him against an attack from a new worker

Tragedy

In literature, tragedy refers to works where a person, often of great achievement, is destroyed through a character flaw that he or she possesses. In classic tragedy, this "fall" is often from a great height (Oedipus and Hamlet were both royalty, for example)

and is inevitable, given the character's character flaw. *Flowers for Algernon* is certainly about a fall from a height, and Charlie's descent from genius to subnormal intelligence is inevitable. Charlie does have character flaws-an arrogance and impatience which appear when he becomes a genius but these do not lead to his fall. Instead, the "flaw" is outside of Charlie, in the technology which raises him to a great height and then allows him to fall back down. In this way, Keyes is able to use the devices of tragedy to make a very modern point: that our technology is as imperfect as we are

Historical Context

Civil Rights in the 1960s

The issue which lies at the heart of *Flowers for Algernon* is Charlie Gordon's struggle to be recognized and treated as a human being. Prior to his operation, he was regarded as somehow less than fully human because of his subnormal intelligence. After the operation, he is discriminated against in a different way, as ordinary people shun him and the scientists who raised his IQ treat him as little more than another laboratory specimen. It should come as no surprise that this story of a person who manages to be a member of two different minorities-the mentally handicapped and the mentally superior-should have appeared during a time of growing awareness of the problems and the rights of minority groups.

The period from the first publication of *Flowers for Algernon* as a short story to its publication as a novel, the period from 1959 to 1966, saw the rise of the civil rights movement in the United States. Although most immediately and dramatically focused on the task of securing equal rights for African Americans, the civil rights movement was accompanied by increasing attention to the issue of fair and equal treatment for all. The 1964 Civil Rights Bill prohibited racial discrimination; 1966, the year *Flowers for Algernon* was published, saw the founding of the National Organization for Women. The rights of the mentally handicapped were also addressed during this time: in 1962 the President's Panel on Mental Retardation was organized, leading in 1968 to the Declaration of the General and Specific Rights of the Mentally Retarded. By the 1970s, the term "retardation" was replaced with "developmental disability," and specific provisions for the protection of the mentally handicapped from violence and discrimination became law. *Flowers for Algernon's* message of tolerance and understanding for the mentally handicapped reflects the social and political struggles of its day, and the years following the novel's publication saw many of these issues regarding developmental disability finally addressed in the legislature and the courts.

Psychology and the Rise of Scientific Research

In addition to the Civil Rights movement, the 1950s and 1960s also saw the rise of psychoanalysis as a generally accepted method of dealing with emotional disorders. The theories of Sigmund Freud. which saw human motivation as stemming largely from unconscious desires which are often traceable to childhood experiences and which frequently center on sex, were particularly influential during this time. Freud's theories were so widely discussed that most people, even if they were not trained in psychoanalysis, probably had some familiarity with concepts such as repression, neurosis, and the unconscious. Accordingly, the novel's focus on psychological themes, especially Charlie's emotional problems stemming from the abuse he suffered from his mother. was immediately familiar to the readers of the 1960s.

Also on the rise in the 1950s and 1960s was funding for scientific research. Locked in a Cold War with the Soviet Union and still remembering Nazi Germany's V-2 rockets and the terrifying success of the atomic bomb, the United States during this era spent an unprecedented amount of money on scientific research. Government organizations such as the National Science Foundation. as well as private foundations and corporations, poured millions of dollars into scientific research. This included "basic" research that would not necessarily yield immediate practical applications. With so much money available, competition for funding intensified and universities became increasingly focused on obtaining and keeping research funding. In *Flowers for Algernon.* Professor Nemur and Dr. Strauss's funding from the "Welburg Foundation," as well as the pressure Nemur feels to publish his results and secure his professional reputation, directly reflect this trend.

Critical Overview

There is not as much critical commentary on *Flowers for Algernon* as there is on some other contemporary novels. What criticism does exist has occasionally found fault with the novel on the grounds of sentimentality or predictability, but on the whole the critical response has been favorable. Critics have also noted the novel's status as a work of science fiction.

Typical of the critical response to Keyes's novel is Mark R. Hillegas' 1966 *Saturday Review* essay, which ranks *Flowers for Algel7lon* with Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano* and Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s A *Canticle for Leibowitz* as a "work of quality science fiction," although Hillegas finds the novel "considerably less powerful" than Vonnegut's or Miller's novels. Hillegas also notes that Keyes's novel is occasionally "marred by a clichéd dialogue or a too predictable description." Nonetheless, he finds that the novel "offers compassionate insight into the situation of the mentally retarded" and is "profoundly moving."

Other contemporary reviews sounded much the same note. Eliot Fremont-Smith, writing in the *New York Times* in 1966, states that Keyes "has taken the obvious, treated it in a most obvious fashion, and succeeded in creating a tale that is convincing, suspenseful, and touching-all in modest degree, but it is enough." Despite the many potential problems, such as how to convincingly show Charlie as a genius, "the skill shown here is awesome," and "affecting, too--how otherwise explain the tears that come to one's eyes at the novel's end?" Similarly, a reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* finds some of the minor characters "less successfully created" but praises the novel as "a far more intelligent book than the vast majority of 'straight' novels."

What critical attention *Flowers from Algernon* has received since its original publication has come mostly from scholars discussing the novel as a work of science fiction. In his 1975 book *Structural Fabulation: An Essay on Fiction of the Future,* Robert Scholes discusses the novel as "minimal SF' that, unlike some works of science fiction, "establishes only one discontinuity between its world and our own"-in other words, the experiment which raises Charlie's intelligence. Scholes finds the novel "beautifully problematic" and asserts that its power derives largely from the fact that the results of the operation are impermanent. While "Keyes has fleshed out his idea with great skill," Scholes also sees the novel as "deficient in artistic integrity" because of its existence as both a short story and a novel.

More recently, the noted British SF writer and critic Brian W. Aldiss, in his 1986 book *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction,* compares Charlie to the character of Lenny in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men.* Unlike other critics, Aldiss prefers the original short story to the novel: "This moving story lost something of its power when expanded to novel length." And in his 1990 study *Understanding Contemporary American Science Fiction,* Thomas D. Clareson claims that Keyes "revitalized the myth of Frankenstein by introducing a fresh narrative perspective" and combining "Mary Shelley's nameless creature and the crazed scientist into the single figure of Charlie."

Clareson further notes that the novel's "narrative perspective" makes it "unique in the science fiction pantheon."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

F. Brett Cox is an assistant professor of English at Gordon College in Barnesville, Georgia. In the following essay, he explores how Flowers for Algernon *both works as and transcends science fiction, particularly in its exploration of themes of alienation and humanity.*

Like Harper Lee and J. D. Salinger, Daniel Keyes is an author whose reputation rests on a single remarkable novel. Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon,* like Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye,* is a powerful story of alienation, of an individual who is at odds with his society and who struggles to have satisfactory relationships with others. Unlike Lee's and Salinger's novels, however, *Flowers for Algernon* is also a work of science fiction: the type of science fiction, according to *Saturday Review* critic Mark R. Hillegas, that "deals with moral, social, psychological, theological, or philosophical problems imagined as resulting from inventions, discoveries, or scientific hypotheses." While firmly within the "literary" tradition of Lee and Salinger, therefore, *Flowers for Algernon* also stands in the tradition of such classic science fiction novels as Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s *Player Piano,* Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451,* and Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s *A Canticle for Leibowitz.*

Keyes' story is also noteworthy for its success in many different forms. It was originally published as a short story, which was adapted in 1961 as a television play entitled *The Two Worlds of Charlie Gordon.* The full-length novel version was adapted in 1968 as the feature film *Charly.* The short story won the World Science Fiction Convention Hugo Award for best story of 1959, the novel won the Science Fiction Writers of America Nebula Award as best novel of 1966, and Cliff Robertson, the actor who portrayed Charlie Gordon in the feature film., won the Academy Award for Best Actor.

The science fiction idea of *Flowers for Algernon* is simple: what if people could undergo a surgical procedure that would false their IQ's? The first person to undergo such an operation is Charlie Gordon, a 32-year-old man with an IQ of 68. Unlike many other mentally handicapped adults, Charlie is highly motivated to learn. He goes to night school at the Beekman University Center for Retarded Adults and repeatedly states his desire to be smarter than he is. It is this level of motivation, finally, that convinces the scientists in charge of the project to accept him as the second subject for the procedure, the first having been a mouse named Algernon.

Much of the novel's power comes from Keyes' remarkable use of first-person point of view. *Flowers for Algernon* is told in the form of "Progress Reports" written by Charlie for the scientists conducting the project. The reports before and soon after the operation are written in nonstandard English, full of the kind of mistakes one would expect from writing by a mentally handicapped adult:

Dr Strauss says I should rite down what I think and remembir and evrey thing that happins to me from now on I dont no why but he says its importint so they will see if they can use me. I hope they use me becaus Miss Kiuman says mabye they can make

me smart I want to be smart My name is Charlie Gordon I werk in Donners bakery where Mr Donner gives me 11 dollers a week and bred or cake if I want. I am 32 yeres old and next month is my birthday.

As Charlie's intelligence grows, His Progress Reports become more and more literate and sophisticated. Three months after the operation, he writes

I've got to realize that when they continually admonish me to speak and write simply so that people who read these reports will be able to understand me, they are talking about themselves as well But still it's frightening to realize that my fate is in the hands of men who are not the giants I once thought them to be, men who don't know all the answers.

The striking contrasts between the earlier and later entries, both in style and content, dramatize both the changes Charlie undergoes and the obstacles he must overcome. Keyes' deft handling of point of view helps to ensure that, unlike in many science fiction novels, the ideas in *Flowers for Algernon* are expressed through the novel's characters, and not the other way around.

The two quotes above also represent the central conflict of the novel' the difference between Charlie's, and the scientists', expectations of what can be accomplished through increased intelligence' and the reality of what intelligence alone can and cannot do. Before the operation, Charlie wants to be smart, not to gain power or advancement, but to improve his relationships with other people: "I dont care so much about beeing famus. I just want to be smart like other pepul so I can have lots of friends who like me." However, as Charlie's IQ increases, so does his disillusionment. When His "friends" make fun of him, he understands their true motivations: "Now I know what they mean when they say 'to pull a Charlie Gordon.'" He steadily advances at work, but "all of the pleasure is gone because the others resent me." He falls in love with Alice Kinman, the night school teacher who originally recommended him for the operation, and is devastated by her rejection. Charlie is becoming aware that factual knowledge and intellectual ability alone do not prepare a person to deal with all of life's problems: "Ironic that all my intelligence doesn't help me solve a problem like this.

As Charlie learns more about the people in his life, he also learns more about himself. The postoperative sleep learning he undergoes to increase his store of factual knowledge also triggers his recovery of long-suppressed memories. These memories, recorded in the Progress Reports as they occur, reveal the harrowing details of Charlie's early life, especially concerning his abusive mother, Rose. At first, she denied there was anything "wrong" with Charlie and beat him when he was unable to learn like other children. However, after Charlie's sister Norma was born with normal intelligence, Rose turned against Charlie. Obsessively (and needlessly) fearful of Charlie molesting Norma, Rose reacted with particular violence to any behavior that showed evidence of his normally developing sexuality. Charlie's extraordinary motivation to learn, therefore, as well as his difficulty in expressing his sexual desires for women, are rooted in how he was treated by his mother. Keyes thus places the novel's emphasis on psychology firmly within the tradition of Freudian analysis, which sees human motivation as stemming

largely from unconscious desires which are often traceable to childhood experiences and which frequently center on sex.

By the time Charlie's IQ peaks at nearly triple its original level, he realizes he was mistaken to think, as he did before the operation, that with increased intelligence "you can have lots of friends to talk to and you never get lonely." His relationship with Alice has deepened, but when she is finally able to return his feelings, he is unable to make love to her. More importantly, the gap between their respective IQs makes it harder and harder for them to communicate, a problem Charlie now has with almost everyone. As Burt, the graduate student who administers Charlie's psychological tests, points out to him, "You've got a superb mind now... But you're lopsided. You know things. You see things. But you haven't developed understanding or-I have to use the word-tolerance." In particular, Charlie has come to regard Nemur and Strauss, the scientists in charge of the project, as narrowly-focused specialists more interested in acquiring fame and power than they are in increasing knowledge and helping others. His disappointment with them turns into fear when he discovers that there is a flaw in Professor Nemur's analysis of the "waiting period" following the operation, a flaw which may indicate that the results of the operation are not permanent

By this point in the novel, Keyes has firmly established what critic Thomas D. Clareson has called *Flowers for Algernon's* "double-edged theme: the unthinking brutality with which society treats the mentally retarded and the terrible isolation of soaring intellect."

After walking out on a psychology conference where the scientists "talk[ed] about me as if I were some kind of newly-created thing," Charlie turns his back on both Alice and the project scientists.

But despite his genius-level IQ and newfound personal freedom, his sense of isolation increases. He forms a relationship with Fay Lillman, an artist who knows nothing of Charlie's "former" life and whose Uninhibited, free-spirited lifestyle is a sharp contrast to both the earnest and responsible Alice and the demanding, controlling project scientists. But, as with Alice, he is unable to have a sexual relationship with her. Yearning for meaningful contact with others, he walks the streets of New York feeling an "unbearable hunger" for contact with others. He even goes to visit his father, who left his mother several years earlier. His father fails to recognize him, and Charlie, sensing himself about to be disappointed yet again, does not reveal his identity: "I wasn't his son. That was another Charlie. Intelligence and knowledge had changed me, and he would resent me-as the others from the bakery resented me-because my growth diminished him."

There follows one of the key moments in the novel when, while dining alone in a restaurant, Charlie witnesses an obviously slow-witted young man drop a stack of dishes. Seeing his earlier self in this young man, Charlie is outraged by the abusive response of the young man's boss and the condescension of the customers, doubly so because "at first I had been amused along with the rest." After this incident, Char he decides to return to Beekman University and begin his own research to try and perfect the procedure that raised his IQ.

The Progress Reports Charlie writes while engaged in his own research reveal a Charlie Gordon who is, for the first time, a fully functional adult. He works feverishly, driven by his fear of reverting back to his former self-Algernon is beginning to show signs of instability and decline. However, Charlie is also driven by his desire to help others like himself: "if [my research] adds even one jot of information to whatever else has been discovered about mental retardation and the possibility of helping others like myself, I will be satisfied," and by the sheer joy of discovery. "I'm living at a peak of clarity and beauty I never knew existed." He is finally able to distance himself from his childhood traumas and make love to Fay Most importantly, he begins to achieve a more mature insight into his own nature and that of other people. In a violent argument with Nemur, Charlie declares that "intelligence and education that hasn't been tempered by human affection isn't worth a damn ... But all too often a search for knowledge drives out the search for love."

Eventually, Charlie discovers the flaw in the experiment, and his worst fear is realized His raised intelligence is not permanent, within a few months, he will return to his former mental state. How Charlie faces this devastating news shows that, beyond his increased IQ, he has learned far more important lessons of tolerance, understanding, and acceptance. "No one is in any way to blame for what has happened," he writes shortly before he enters his final decline. "I don't want anyone to suffer because of what happens to me." After visiting his mother, who has fallen into senility and only sporadically recognizes her son, Charlie realizes that she is no longer a target for hatred: "I must understand the way she saw it. Unless I forgive her, I will have nothing." He finally is able to make love to Alice, the only person he has truly loved, and for a brief period they have a complete and fulfilling relationship.

But Charlie's decline is even more rapid than his ascent. He leaves Alice and the others of the project rather than have them witness his return to subnormal intelligence, a process depicted in agonizing detail as his Progress Reports return to the broken English and lack of awareness they exhibited before the operation Charlie's return to his former state is all the more poignant because, although he has lost his intelligence, he has not lost all of the insights he gained: "if they make fun of you dont get sore because you remember their not so smart like you once thot they were." At the end of the novel, Charlie prepares to go voluntarily to the Warren State Home for the mentally handicapped, leaving a final request regarding Algernon, who had died two months earlier: "please if you get a chanse put some flowrs on Algermons grave in the bak yard."

Keyes has published two other novels and three nonfiction books, all of which also deal with themes of psychology and the structure of the human personality, but *Flowers for Algernon* remains his most famous work. Although critics have been largely positive about the novel, their praise has sometimes been accompanied by negative comments, usually along the lines of Mark R. Hillegas' suggestion that the novel is occasionally "marred by a clichéd dialogue or a too predictable description." These reservations, however, have not kept critics from acknowledging *Flowers for Algernon* as an unusually powerful and involving work of literature, or kept two generations of readers from keeping it in print. In the words of a *Times Literary Supplement* critic, although the novel

is "painful," it is also "important and moving... Mr. Keyes has the technical equipment to prevent us from shrugging off the pain."

Source: F Brett Cox, 10 an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 1997

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Small traces Flowers for Algernon *through several incarnations, and praises it as a successful example of fiction that answers the question "what if?"*

Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon* appeared first in the form of a long short story in 1959 in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction,* and in 1960 received from the World Science Fiction Society the Hugo Award for the Best Novelette of that year. It seems to have been immediately recognized as a piece of literature well above the routine, for it was anthologized in the next two years in *Fifth Annual of the Year's Best Science Fiction, Best Articles and Stones,* and *Literary Cavalcade.* In the years that followed, it re-appeared as a television play by the Theater Guild under the title, *The Two Worlds of Charlie Gordon,* in 1966 in an expanded version as a novel, and later still in 1968 as a film with the title *Charly.* The film's star, Cliff Robertson, received an Oscar for his performance. The novel version received the Nebula Award for the Best Novel of 1966 from the Science Fiction Writers of America.

Reviews of the novel on its first appearance were generally very favorable and tended to praise its treatment of mental retardation. For example, the *Times Literary Supplement* said the following:

a good example of that kind of science fiction which uses a persuasive hypothesis to explore emotional and moral issues. By doing more justice than is common to the complexity of the central character's responses it gives body to its speculations. In its ideas, especially to his speculations about the relationship between I Q. and maturity, tins is a far more intelligent book than the vast majority of "straight" novels Moreover, the intelligence is displayed in a treatment of subject-matter which is bound to affect us as both important and moving

It has, then, achieved literary success in an unusual variety of forms, and may well be the best known work of science fiction to the general public, that is, to non-science fiction fans. This success has come about because, as Robert Scholes puts it, "it was based on a powerful concept which worked well in all those forms."

Although it originally appeared in a magazine devoted to science fiction, fictional science is used sparingly, allowing the author, with one exception to the ordinary and real, to answer the "What if?" that is the trade mark of this literary genre. Keyes raises the question, What if an operation could be discovered that allowed a retarded person to develop not only average intelligence but to become the world's most brilliant man? The author answers that question by inventing such a procedure and then allowing the reader to follow that development stage by stage as the subject of the experiment, Charlie Gordon, a slow-witted but pleasant and kind man, becomes [as Robert Scholes describes him in *Structural Tabulation]* increasingly "an impatient, aggressive, arrogant, and unlovable man as his powers increase, inspiring envy, jealousy, and even fear in others." Aware of what is happening to him, Charlie fights the negative change in his

personality, but fails to overcome his contempt for the ordinary individuals around him. Here is a quotation from his journal when he is at his most arrogant:

But there were other kinds of papers too-P. T. Zellerman's study on the difference in the length of tune it took white rats to learn a maze when the corners were curved rather than angular, or Worfel's paper on the effect of intelligence level on the reaction time of rhesus monkeys. Papers like these made me angry. Money, time, and energy squandered on the detailed analysis of the trivial.

Keyes "what if' question is one that might occur to any reader, for who would not wish to become a genius? But the story is not merely a pleasant fantasy. Rather, Keyes returns the reader to reality by having the effects of the operation gradually reverse themselves. Charlie, who has been the butt of jokes by the "normal" people he works with, gradually regains their friendship as his mind returns to its retarded state and he returns mostly but not fully to his more pleasant personality, "affection grounded in pity" Scholes calls it. Charlie is retarded at the beginning of the story, and he is not aware that the friends he has are not real friends, that they treat him with disrespect, look down upon him, and enjoy a sense of superiority because they are not like him:

Gimpy hollered at me because I droppd a tray full of rolles I was carrying over to the oven They got derty and he had to wipe them off before he put them in to bake Gimpy hollers at me all the time when I do something rong, but he reely likes me because hes my frend. Boy if I get smart wont he be serprised.

At the end, when these former friends begin to treat him as they formerly had, he accepts them but with more understanding of who they are and why they act as they do. He comments:

Evrybody looked at me when I came downstairs and started working in the toilet sweeping it out like I use to do I said to myself Charlie if they make fun of you dont get sore because you remember their not so smart like you once thot they were.

Writing in *Library Journal* [February 1, 1966] shortly after the story appeared in its novel form, Keyes described his story this way:

Flowers for Algernon is the story of a man's inner Journey from a world of retardation to a world of high intelligence. Charlie Gordon lives through comic, sad and ironic experiences as he emerges from his mental darkness, through the various stages of perceiving and understanding levels of knowledge, into the light of complex awareness of the world, of people, and of himself

A major contributor to the success of the work in novelette and novel form is the fact that the author tells the story by means of a notebook that Charlie begins to keep at the behest of the doctor involved. Thus we see both the low level of literacy and thought that marks Charlie at the start of the adventure, as well as the sweetness of his character, by means of those journal entries. And we like him and yet feel the contempt that Scholes tells us is the basis for pity. At the same time, the story as told through Charlie's own journal, effectively carries out one of the main qualities that proponents of

literature claim for it, immediacy of experience, that is, empathetic power. In Scholes' words, "It conveys to us the deprivation involved in mental retardation as no amount of reports or exhortations could possibly do."' For example, Charlie writes, "If your smart you can have lots of friends to talk to and you never get lonely by yourself all the time." And later, reflecting on his former state when he encounters a retarded boy, he writes,

It infuriated me to remember that not too long ago I-like this boy-had foolishly played the clown.

And I had almost forgotten.

Only a short time ago, I learned that people laughed at me. Now I can see that unknowingly I joined them in laughing at myself. That hurts most of all

As the effects of the operation appear, the entries in the notebook parallel those changes. Charlie's style evolves from short, awkward sentences and partial sentences cluttered with misspellings and marked by a limited vocabulary into, first, what Scholes calls "a rich, vigorous syntax." Then, as Charlie's mind begins its retreat to its former state, his style gradually reflects that change, though it can be argued at the end of the novel he has retained perhaps a bit of the grasp of language that he had at the height of his mental powers.

At first, Charlie is not aware that he is losing the intelligence that he has gained. Soon, however, his still superior mind realizes what is happening, and he struggles to keep what he has gained. As he goes over what he still knows, as he practices and practices what he has learned, each entry in the notebook showing yet further loss, Charlie takes on an heroic stature as someone who has seen the marvelous, lost it, but remains determined at least to keep its memory alive. And Charlie is not bitter. Rather, after a first bout with anger and frustration, as he works to retain what he is losing, he regains the sweetness of his temper, his kindness, tolerance, and generosity. Here he is in the midst of his struggle to keep what he is gradually losing'

I dont no why fin dumb agen or what I did rong. Mabye its because I dint try hard enuf or Just some body put the evel eye on me. But if I try and practis very hard mabye ill get a littel smarter and no what all the words are I remembir a littel bit how nice I had a feeling with the blue book that I red with the toren cover. And when I close my eyes I think about the man who tored the book [the smart Charlie) and he looks like me only he looks different and he talks different but I dont think its me because its like I see him from the window.

Anyway thats why fin gone to keep trying to get smart so I can have that feeling agen. Its good to no things and be smart and I wish I new evrything in the hole world. I wish I could be smart agen rite now. If I could I would sit down and reed all the time.

The story, then, has much to offer a reader, and it seems especially well suited to a young reader. The premise is easy to understand and one that most of us, including

children, can identify with-the desirability of becoming smarter. Keyes's "what if' question is, in fact, probably one that most students have wished for in the competitive world of the school. At the same time, young readers can be helped through Charlie's entries at the beginning and close of the story to see into the world of someone like Charlie and understand that it is he, not the false friends around him, who is worthy of respect. As the story progresses, they can identify with his exultation over his growing intellect; but they can also see that the arrogance and cruelty resulting from his superior intellect make him less than he could be, less in some ways than the earlier Charlie was. As the process reverses itself and Charlie becomes less smart, young readers can surely feel the terrible sense of loss that Charlie feels and realize that he faces that loss far better than they might. They can admire the determination that he displays to the very end of the story to hold on to what he can of his new found understanding.

Many teachers have recognized the fact that *Flowers for Algernon* would make an effective focus for reading and discussing in an English class, and so it has been used extensively with middle and high school classes. It appears on many recommended reading lists for these grades, including the National Council of Teachers of English *Books for You,* the American Library Association's *Outstanding Books for the College Bound,* and the H. W. Wilson company's *Senior High School Library Catalog.* The Perfection Form company has prepared a set of work sheets to accompany its study, and versions of it have appeared in school literature anthologies.

But its use has not been without censorship problems. Two of the most common points of objection to literature by would-be censors have been aimed at it: sex and religion. Charlie is, of course, a young man. As such, he would realistically have an interest in sex; and Keyes does devote a few passages to rather tame sexual encounters. As a result it has been called pornographic and sexually explicit, although it surely is neither. In addition, because the operation changes Charlie from the man that some readers feel their God meant Charlie to be, it has been accused of tampering with the will of God, of turning men-the doctors, that is into gods, and of supernaturalism, although the story clearly dwells in the world of Science fiction rather than fantasy. It is, these critics argue, only for God to give mankind intellect. It was Satan who aspired to such power; and so if a work of literature shows a human possessing such powers, that work is clearly irreligious and perhaps Satanic. The Office for Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association and People for the American Way have documented numerous recent cases; it is listed in ALA's *Hit List* as one of the most frequent targets of censorship.

The power of *Flowers for Algernon* lies partly in the original concept, the "what if' that Keyes asks and then answers. More important, the novel gives its readers profound insights into people, retarded, average, brilliant, kind and cruel, and it does so with stylistic brilliance and control. Perhaps most important, it creates one of those rare truly round fictional characters, to use Forester's term, who surprise convincingly, who have lives before and after the story is told, who seem to possess free will. Keyes' accomplishment is all the more impressive because his character changes so drastically during the course of the novel, yet remains for the reader one human, and one we

continue to care about past the end of the novel. Toward that end, Charlie writes in his last entry,

If you ever reed tins Miss Kinnian [his former teacher] dont be sorry for me. Im glad I got a second chanse in life like you S8.Id to be smart because I lerned a lot of things that I never even new were in this werld and Im grateful I saw it all even for a littel bit. And Im glad I found out about my family and me it was like I never had a family til I remembird about them and saw them and now I know I had a family and I was a person Just Wee evryone.

Source: Robert Small, Jr., " *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes," in *Censored Books. Critical Viewpoints,* edited by Nicholas J Karolides, Lee Burress, and John M Kean, Scarecrow Press, 1993, pp. 249-255.

Critical Essay #3

Scholes is an American scholar and critic who has written widely on postmodern realistic fiction. In the following excerpt, he discusses Flowers for Algernon *as a work of science fiction, dividing its main idea into two halves: the operation to develop Charlie's intelligence-a familiar motif in science fiction-and the impermanence of the operation, which distinguishes the novel as an original and powerful work. Additionally Scholes observes that the book's packaging circumvents questions about its genre.*

Daniel Keyes's *Flowers for Algernon* might be called minimal SF. It establishes only one discontinuity between its world and our own, and this discontinuity requires no appreciable reorientation of our assumptions about man, nature, or society. Yet this break with the normal lifts the whole story out of our familiar experiential situation. It is the thing which enables everything else in the novel, and it is thus crucial to the generation of this narrative and to its affect on readers. How crucial this idea is can be seen in the story's history, which, as it happens, makes an interesting fable in itself. It first appeared as a long story in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* in Apri11959. It received a Hugo award in 1960 for the best science fiction novelette of the year. It was then reprinted in *The Best from Fantasy and Science Fiction* and in the *Fifth Annual of the Year's Best Science Fiction,* both published in 1960, and in *Best Articles and Stories* and *Literary Cavalcade* in 1961. It was made into a television drama and then rewritten to appear as a full-length novel in 1966. Then it was made into a movie and given, of course, a new title: *CHARLY* (with the *R* childishly reversed). In 1967 it appeared in paperback and has now been through more than thirty printings. My paperback copy, which is from the thirty-second printing (1972), has a scene from the film on the cover, with the word *CHARLY* prominently displayed, and a bundle of "rave" quotations from reviewers on the back cover. Nowhere on the cover of this book does the expression "science fiction" appear. Even the Hugo award (which is at least as reliable an indicator of quality as, say, the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction) goes unmentioned inside, in very fine print, the ultra-snoopy purchaser may find in the back pages some words about the author, which indicate that this work first appeared as a "magazine story" (but the name of the magazine is suppressed) and that it won a Hugo award as the "best science novelette" in 1960. Even there, the cautious editors have managed to avoid the stigmatizing expression. *Flowers for Algernon* has gone straight, folks; it has passed the line around the SF ghetto, and to remind us of its sordid history would be downright impolite. And it might chase away a lot of potential customers who "hate science fiction."

An interesting fable, is it not, from which a number of conclusions may be drawn. It certainly reveals something about attitudes toward SF in various quarters, and this is instructive as well as amusing. But it also reveals something about the genre itself. *Flowers for Algernon* could succeed in four distinct forms (novelette, TV drama, full-length film, and full-length novel) because it was based on a powerful concept which worked well in all those forms. Daniel Keyes had an exceptionally good idea for a work of fiction, and the idea is what made it originally and still makes it a work of SF. The idea is simply that an operation might be performed on a severely retarded adult male, which

would enable his mind not merely to catch up with those of his peers but actually to surpass theirs. That is half of the idea. The other half, which completes and justifies this idea, is that the effects of the operation would prove impermanent, so that the story involves our watching the protagonist grow into a genius unconsciously, and then consciously but helplessly slip back toward a state of semi-literacy. When this mental voyage has come full circle, the story is over.

For many people, I suspect, the first half of this idea constitutes the domain of SF, a land of moon sequential wish-fulfillment in which the natural laws that constitute the boundaries of human life are playfully suspended. But the best writers of structural fabulation do not settle for mere imaginative play. Daniel Keyes completed the circuit of his idea, and the beauty and power of the resulting story were acknowledged by his readers at the eighteenth World Science Fiction Convention, where he was awarded the Hugo. It should be added that Keyes's execution of his idea was fully adequate to the original conception. He undertook to present the story through a Journal kept by the protagonist himself, at the request of His doctor. Thus, we see the growth of Charlie Gordon's mind through the evolution of his prose style as well as in the events narrated. (Mr. Keyes, we might note, happens to be an English teacher.) Charlie acquires a competence in grammar, an extensive lexicon, and a rich, vigorous syntax-and then gradually loses all these, as his mental powers fade. He also becomes an impatient, aggressive, arrogant, and unlovable man as His powers increase, inspiring envy, jealousy, and even fear in others. But as he loses His mental competence he regains the affection of those around him-an affection grounded in pity, which is, as Joseph Conrad knew, a form of contempt.

This tale is beautifully problematic. It conveys to us the deprivation involved in mental retardation as no amount of reports or exhortations could possibly do it. And it does this by the fabulative device of an apparently miraculous scientific discovery. It is fabulation that promotes speculation, and speculation that is embodied in an emotionally powerful fable. The intensity of our emotional commitment to the events of any fiction, of course, is a function of countless esthetic Choices made by the author-at the level of the word, the sentence, the episode, the character, the ordering of events, and the manner of the presentation. These aspects of *Flowers for Algernon* cannot be dismissed without devoting much more space-time to this story than is available here. I must assert, merely, that Keyes has fleshed out his idea with great skill, and I invite those interested to investigate the text for themselves....

I should like to use this occasion to examine an aspect of this story which is typical of the genre as a whole, and of the special qualities which seem to differentiate it from other kinds of fiction. Like many works of SF, *Flowers for Algernon* appeared first as a story and then was "expanded" into a novel. Now all of our training in esthetics and all of our background in the critical thought of Flaubert and James, for instance, must lead us to believe that a work of verbal art consists of one set of words in one particular order. Thus, this idea of expansion seems to have more to do with packaging and merchandising than it can do with art. To some extent this must be admitted. The shapes of genres have always had something to do with the means of their communication and the needs of their audiences. But if the "same" story can appear in

two different versions just to suit the exigencies of commercial publication as a magazine story and a book, then we may rightfully feel that the work must be deficient in artistic integrity.

Source: Robert Scholes, "Structural Fabulation," IU *Structural Fabulation' An Essay on Fiction of the Future,* University of Notre Dame Press, 1975, pp. 45-76.

Adaptations

The original short story version of *Flowers for Algernon* was adapted for television as *The Two Worlds of Charlie Gordon* for CBS Playhouse in 1961.

The novel *Flowers for Algernon* was made into the feature film *Charly* in 1968, Cliff Robertson won the Academy Award as Best Actor for his portrayal of Charlie Gordon, available from CBS/Fox Home Video.

The novel has also been presented on the stage, David Rogers adapted the novel as a two-act play, *Flowers for Algernon,* in 1969; a dramatic musical, *Charlie and Algernon,* was first produced in Canada in 1978 and played on Broadway in 198O, Stage plays based on the novel have also been produced in France, Australia, Poland, and Japan.

Flowers for Algernon has also been adapted for radio: as a monodrama for Irish radio in 1983, and as a radio play in Czechoslovakia in 1988.

Topics for Further Study

Research the history of public attitudes towards mental retardation in the United States and discuss the problems Charlie Gordon faces in the novel in the context of this history.

Research Sigmund Freud's theories of psychology and discuss how Charlie Gordon's emotional problems (not his low IQ) can be explained in terms of Freudian analysis.

Read the original short story version of *Flowers for Algernon* and compare it with the novel What changes have been made, and how do hose changes affect the reader's response to the story?

Compare and Contrast

1960s: The civil rights movement was in full force, with passage of legislation addressing discrimination against African Americans and increasing awareness of the rights of other oppressed groups, including the mentally handicapped. However, prejudice was still widespread, and there was as yet little to no legal protection for mentally handicapped persons.

Today: Legislative and legal protection for the mentally handicapped 1S extensive, while public sensitivity to the rights of the handicapped has increased markedly. Terms such as "retarded" and "feeble-minded" have been replaced with less negatively-charged terms such as "mentally challenged" and "developmentally disabled." However, civil rights as a whole is in a volatile period, as the public at large seems increasingly resistant to the demands of minority groups.

1960s: Psychoanalysis is increasingly accepted as a means of dealing with mental illness, while the theories of Sigmund Freud enjoy widespread public awareness and acceptance.

Today: The treatment of emotional disorders is increasingly diverse, with traditional psychoanalysis complemented by various holistic, Eastern, and "New Age" approaches, as well as by the development of increasingly effective antidepressants and other psychoactive drugs. However, the theories of Sigmund Freud are not as widely accepted as in the past, and the public at large appears 1mpatient with what it sees as abnormal or dangerous behavior "excused" because of past trauma.

1960s: The pressures of the Cold War lead to an unprecedented amount of spending on scientific research by both the U.S. government and private foundations and corporations.

Today: With the Cold War over and budgets shrinking, competition for research funding is more intense than ever, and funding agencies are increasingly reluctant to support research that does not have immediate, practical results.

What Do I Read Next?

The Minds of Billy Milligan 18 Daniel Keyes's 1981 nonfiction study of the case of Billy Milligan. When Milligan was arrested and charged with rape in 1977, he was found to have at least twenty-four distinct personalities Milligan became the first person in U.S. history to be acquitted of a major felony by reason of multiple personality .

The Science Fiction Hall of Fame, Vol. I, edited by Robert Silverberg, is a 1970 anthology of classic science fiction stones which contains Keyes's original short story version of "Flowers for Algernon."

Theodore Sturgeon's *More Than Human,* published in 1953, is a classic science fiction novel which, like *Flowers for Algernon,* is based on psychology and deals with the alienation of unusual individuals.

The character of Boo Radley in *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, published in 1960, is another example of an emotionally disabled victim of childhood abuse who is shunned by society.

Novelist and critic Brian W. Aldiss has compared Charlie Gordon to Lenny, one of the main characters in John Steinbeck's classic American novel *Of Mice and Men* (1940).

Flowers for Algernon has been compared to *A Canticle for Leibowitz,* Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s 1959 novel of the world after a nuclear holocaust, as an example of "quality" science fiction.

Further Study

Discovering Most-Studied Authors, Gale, 1996.

Offers biographical and critical information about Keyes.

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Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Novels for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535