

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Flowers for Algernon by Daniel Keyes

Book Information

Daniel Keyes, Flowers for Algernon

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Interest Level: UG

Is superior intelligence the answer to all of Charlie's problems? If so, he gains more than he had bargained for.

Award: NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; Nebula Award/Finalist

Topics: Disabilities, Learning; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

Main Characters

Alice Kinnian Charlie's teacher at a school for retarded adults, who later becomes his lover

Charlie Gordon the principal character of the story; a thirty-two-year-old retarded man who undergoes a human intelligence experiment

Dr. Strauss the man who performs the experimental surgery on Charlie to increase Charlie's intelligence

Fay an artist and a free spirit who is neighbor to Charlie in his Times Square apartment

Joe Carp and Frank Reilly two men who work with Charlie at Donner's Bakery

Professor Nemur the man who develops the intelligence experiment

Vocabulary

catatonic a condition of suspended animation and loss of voluntary motion in which the limbs remain in whatever position they are placed

dilettante person who pursues the fine arts, literature or science merely for amusement

methodology a particular procedure or set of procedures in a specific field

Synopsis

Charlie Gordon is a thirty-two-year-old retarded man. He works at Donner's Bakery doing janitorial duties. He is always pleasant, hard-working and eager to please the bakery staff. He lives alone and receives eleven-dollars-a-week pay. Charlie's ambition is to become smarter. If he is smarter, he thinks he will have more friends. He attends Beekman School for Retarded Adults and, with his positive attitude, impresses his teacher, Miss Alice Kinnian.

When Miss Kinnian recommends Charlie to Professor Nemur and Dr. Strauss for a human intelligence experiment, his life changes dramatically. Charlie is the first human to have an operation that increases his intelligence. The experiment has only been tested on animals like Algernon, a laboratory mouse. Not long after the operation is performed, Charlie's IQ begins to improve. In fact, within months, his IQ of 68 increases to 185. Charlie outshines even the intellectuals at the college with his grasp of several different languages and his understanding of scientific, mathematical and political theories. Charlie has achieved his goal of becoming "smart."

Charlie's intelligence, however, becomes a burden in many ways. The employees at Donner's become fearful of him. They cannot understand Charlie's newly acquired intelligence. One worker even suggests that Charlie has made a pact with the devil. Due to workers' complaints, Mr. Donner, the bakery owner, fires Charlie. Charlie has lost the only job he ever had, and with it, the people he has always considered family.

As Charlie's intelligence increases, so does his capacity for recalling his painful past. He is haunted by memories of his mother's cruelty and his sister Norma's insensitivity. Repeatedly, he recalls how his mother beat him and even threatened to stab him with a butcher knife. He remembers numerous incidents when others treated him with disdain as well. Neighborhood children's taunts and jeers are fresh in his mind.

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Charlie longs for love and acceptance. He truly loves Alice Kinnian, but developing a relationship with her is both complicated and frustrating for him. At first, he does not feel intelligent enough for her. Then, when his IQ soars, she is unable to relate to him. Discovering his own sexuality proves to be frustrating as well. While he has intense sexual feelings, he is also traumatized by them. Whenever he is intimate with a woman, he sees "the old Charlie" watching him.

Charlie's misery is intensified by Professor Nemur. Nemur upsets Charlie several times when he suggests that the retarded Charlie was a "thing," not a person. Later, at a Chicago conference, Nemur presents his research project to a group of scientists as Charlie listens. Charlie and Algernon are evaluated as the "guinea pigs" of the project. Charlie is deeply resentful when Nemur refers to the retarded Charlie as a "feeble-minded shell" and "one of nature's mistakes." He realizes that Nemur has never seen him as an individual and, in his disgust, releases Algernon from his cage. Soon after, Charlie finds Algernon and escapes with the mouse. The two live secretly in an apartment near Times Square.

Algernon soon begins to fail. He is unable to run mazes effectively, and his personality becomes more antagonistic. Charlie realizes the success of "the experiment" was short-lived for Algernon. He also realizes that his own future is bleak—he knows he will most likely digress to his former self as well. Knowing he has little time left, he becomes determined to find the flaw in Nemur's research experiment. During this period, an intimate relationship develops between Alice and himself, and at last Charlie experiences true happiness.

Charlie's happiness, however, is brief. Algernon dies. When Charlie is able to determine the flaw in Nemur's experiment, he becomes aware that he himself is failing. Gradually, Charlie's world falls apart. He, like Algernon, loses his intellectual capabilities and becomes irritable and difficult. Eventually, Charlie realizes that he needs to go to the Warren State Home, and, in a note to Miss

Kinnian and Dr. Strauss, he writes: "Its easy to have frends if you let pepul laff at you. Im going to have lots of friends where I go."

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

After Charlie has surgery, memories of his childhood become clear. He is flooded with memories of his mother's cruelty toward him. Later, when he visits his mother, he does not blame or criticize her for being harsh and insensitive to him as a child. Instead, he is forgiving and compassionate toward her. Why do you think Charlie behaves this way?

He sees his mother in a different light. She is old and senile. He also realizes that she was unable to cope with the stress of having a retarded child.

Literary Analysis

Why is Charlie's relationship with Fay important to his emotional growth?

Fay is uninhibited, independent and humorous. When Charlie meets her, a whole new world is opened to him. She relieves the tension that has mounted in him regarding the "scientific experiment." She makes him feel comfortable about his own sexuality and encourages him to find joy in his life.

Inferential Comprehension

Compare how the workers at the bakery treat Charlie before and after his IQ increases.

Before Charlie has his operation, many of the workers treat him with little respect. They make fun of him for his lack of intelligence. However, they do interact with him, and, consequently, he feels as if he is part of a "family." When Charlie becomes intelligent, the workers feel threatened by him. They alienate him and eventually cause him to be fired.

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Constructing Meaning

Near the end of the book, Alice tells Charlie she wants to live with him until it becomes necessary for him to go to Warren. She also says that she will do her best to forget him when he goes to the school. Do you think Alice will be able to forget Charlie? Do you think she will visit him in Warren?

Answers will vary.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Literary Features In the intelligence experiment, both Algernon and Charlie take maze tests. As their IQs fluctuate, their effectiveness in completing a maze correlates. The maze, however, symbolizes more than just a scientific measurement. Charlie's life, with all its complications and painful setbacks, can easily be compared to a maze. Charlie is aware of this connection, as is evident in the following quote: "...I stood, not knowing which way to go. No matter which path I took I got a shock that meant another mistake. Every path was blocked ... everything I did, everywhere I turned, doors were closed to me." Ask the students to draw a simple maze pattern on paper. The beginning of the intelligence experiment might be the starting point of the maze and the Warren School its end point. Have the students label the walls or roadblocks with the setbacks Charlie suffers. Compare diagrams.

Comparing and Contrasting In the book, Charlie's IQ soars from 70 to 185, and then drops to near its original level. Ask the students to research the meaning of IQ scores and how the scores are calculated. Ask them to write their opinions about the value and validity of the scores.

Differentiating Fact and Opinion Professor Nemur and Dr. Strauss develop and carry out a scientific experiment that alters the brain, and, consequently, changes intelligence levels. Algernon and Charlie are the "guinea pigs" of the experiment. Charlie is the first human being to be tested. Just after Dr. Strauss performs brain

surgery on Charlie, a nurse comments that if God had wanted Charlie to be smart, He would have made him that way. Later, when Charlie is fired from the bakery, a worker there makes the following remark to him: "If you'd read your Bible, Charlie, you'd 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." Ask the students to write an opinion paper explaining their views on the "experiment." Is it right for science to tamper with the human mind?

Responding to Literature Charlie is given the Rorschach Test several times to measure his IQ. Bring in some Rorschach cards. Show some cards, and ask the students what pictures they see in the ink blots. Or have the students make their own cards and do the same activity.

Responding to Literature Invite a resource person into the classroom to answer student questions about mental retardation. Topics covered might include: What causes mental retardation? What are retarded people's capabilities? How many people are born with mental retardation? What services are available for retarded citizens in the area? Are there volunteer jobs that students can do to help retarded people in the community?