

Mrs. Greshock

Literature

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### The Effects of Intelligence in “Flowers for Algernon”

A man with low intelligence undergoes a surgery to gain high intelligence, but at his peak discovers that he will relapse back to his former state and eventually be left to die. This is “Flowers for Algernon.” Charlie Gorden, a 37 year old man, becomes a patient of an experimental operation that will change his views on his peers forever. “Flowers for Algernon” by Daniel Keyes reveals that unnaturally high intelligence leads to looking down on others through Charlie’s epiphany that not everybody is what they seem to be, his conflict with communication, and the characterization of Charlie at the climax of the story.

Charlie’s realization that not everybody is what they seem to be is the first proof that rapidly gained intelligence leads to looking down on others. Near the climax of the story, Charlie is “shocked that the only languages [Dr. Struass] could read were Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, and that he knows almost nothing of mathematics beyond the elementary levels of the calculus of variations. When he admitted this to [Charlie], [he] finds himself almost annoyed” (Keyes 206). The shock and annoyance on Charlie’s part show that when he knows more about his doctors, he thinks they should know more. They do not, so he looks down on them. His doctors notice him commenting on their education and Charlie writes about them acting strangely, “Dr. Nemur appears uncomfortable around me. Sometimes when I try to talk to him, he just looks at me strangely and turns away. I was angry at first when Dr. Strauss told me I was giving Dr. Nemur

an inferiority complex” (Keyes 206). Dr. Nemur is afraid that Charlie with his incredibly high intelligence is looking down on his own normally high intelligence. He thinks that there must be something wrong with him, so secretly looks down on himself. Not only does Dr. Nemur notice Charlie looking down on him, but Fanny, a friend from work tells him about it. “It was evil when Eve listened to the snake and ate from the tree of knowledge,” she says (Keyes 205). In this analogy, Fanny is trying to tell Charlie the evil of seeking out and gaining more intelligence. She says that he used to be a “good, dependable, ordinary man,” but that when he sought out intelligence, or took and ate from the tree of knowledge, he obtained knowledge about other people, and through his enhanced knowledge looks down on others and becomes corrupt. Therefore, Charlie’s epiphany proves that unnaturally high intelligence leads to someone looking down on others or oneself.

Next Keyes’s short story demonstrates that absurdly high intelligence leads to looking down on others or oneself through Charlie’s conflict with communicating with others. Charlie tries to “keep the conversation on a simple, everyday level,” but ends up talking about “the mathematical variance equivalent in Dorbermann’s Fifth Concerto” (Keyes 206). So Charlie does try to simplify things for his peers, but his topics are still too advanced. Others try to understand, but he just gets frustrated. He is frustrated that they cannot understand what comes so easily to him and from there thinks of their lower intelligence as the answer. He is also frustrated at himself for not being able to make them understand, thinking that he might be to blame, thinking that his unbalanced intelligence is responsible. In both of his explanations, he looks down on either others or himself. After the beginning of his mental decline, Charlie still exhibits his social

block. “Dr. Strauss came to see me again,” he writes. “I wouldn’t open the door and I told him to go away. I want to be left to myself” (Keyes 211). In this scene, Charlie wants to be left to himself, to his own fading intelligence, pushing away those who he once saw as below him. He is not looking down on others, but fears them looking down on him. All in all, these examples of Charlie’s communication problems point to the theme of high intelligence leading to looking down on someone.

Lastly, “Flowers for Algernon” reveals that super high intelligence leads to a form of looking down as shown through the developed characterization of Charlie. One day, he comes across a mentally blocked child who is being laughed at. Charlie knows that “they were laughing at him because he was mentally retarded. And [he] had been laughing at him too. Suddenly, [he] was furious with [himself]” (Keyes 207). Charlie, without realizing it, looks down on his former self. When he discovers what he had done, he looks down on his current self for forgetting what he had been. After this event, Charlie reflects, “I see that even in my dullness I knew that I was inferior, and that other people had something I lacked” (Keyes 208). Charlie insults his former self by using words like “dullness,” “inferior,” and “lacked.” By using these insults, he shows that he believes that he was inferior and even that he looked down on himself when he was mentally challenged. To sum this up, the developed characterization of Charlie shows that dealing with intelligence leads people to look down on themselves in Keyes’s short story.

In brief, Charlie’s epiphany, conflict, and characterization point out that unnaturally high intelligence leads to looking down on others or oneself in “Flowers for Algernon” by Daniel Keyes. Charlie’s quest to gain intelligence gives him and everyone he meets a chance to look

down on someone. They chose to abuse that gift, as many now choose to abuse their gifts.

Everyone is given their own gift. They must choose to use it wisely.

Works Cited

Keyes, Daniel. "Flowers for Algernon." Literature. Evanston, IL. McDougal Littell. 2008.