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## The Attitude to Mentally Handicapped People

“Even a feeble-minded man wants to be like other men,” writes Charlie Gordon, the narrator of Daniel Keyes’ novel *Flowers for Algernon*. (Keyes, 184) This novel is known for its apparent respect and understanding of mentally handicapped people. But, as Brent Walter Cline points out in his article “You’re Not the Same Kind of Person: The Evolution of Pity to Horror in Daniel Keyes’ *Flowers for Algernon*”, the novel actually treats mental handicaps as massively devaluing to a person. While some of the plotlines and character interactions help readers start to see mentally handicapped people as valuable, there is also endless negative language used to describe mental disability. Although *Flowers for Algernon* is praised for treating mentally handicapped as complex, the constant and strong negative language used to describe mental handicaps ultimately leaves the reader feeling otherwise.

The scientists who use Charlie in their experiment are the most obvious example of using shameful language to describe retarded Charlie. To these scientists, Charlie Gordon is a test subject first, and a human being second. Especially after the operation, the team of scientists hold very little respect for handicapped Charlie. This disrespect pinnacles at a scientific conference where Charlie and Algernon are displayed as nothing more than the team’s creation. Doctor Strauss, a neurosurgeon and psychiatrist, describes preoperative Charlie as “dull” and having “vacuous facial expression(s)”. (Keyes 147) Soon after, Doctor Nemur, the head of the experiment, reads private and embarrassing excerpts from Charlie’s progress reports. The crowd laughs, ignoring Charlie’s presence entirely. Immediately following is perhaps the most upsetting quote in the novel- “We (...) have the satisfaction of knowing we have taken one of nature’s mistakes and (...) created a superior human being. (...) It might be said that Charlie Gordon did not really exist before this experiment...” (Keyes 148) Charlie’s retardation is described as a mistake, which must be altered by science in order to become worthwhile. These actions, these words used in treatment of preoperative Charlie are immensely disrespectful, and they are common throughout the novel. These examples of mistreatment are intended to draw empathy for Charlie. Readers are meant to see his mistreatment as disgusting, heartbreaking even. But they are too frequent and without enough opposition to appear truly wrong. These examples wear on the reader’s psych until such mistreatment is expected.

The most emotionally intense case of handicap shaming is found in Charlie’s family, specifically his mother Rose. She is a flat, simple-minded woman who cares far too much about what the neighbors think. As such, the presence of a developmentally disabled son in her life is unbearable. As Charlie’s parents prepare to bring him to yet another doctor who claims to be able to make Charlie intelligent, Charlie’s father Matt questions the doctor’s credibility. In

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response, Rose loses control- “‘Don’t say that,’ she screeches. ‘Don’t tell me there’s nothing they can do.’ She grabs Charlie and presses his head against her bosom. ‘He’s going to be normal, whatever we have to do, whatever it costs.’” (Keyes 125) The keywords here and “normal” and “whatever it costs”. In Rose’s mind, he will never be normal until he’s smart, despite the fact that he is very normal within the population of retarded people. Here Rose shows that to her, even an irrational amount of money, time, energy, and emotional upset would be worth having a “normal” son. In this quote and other instances throughout the novel, Charlie’s family holds shame, discomfort, and even embarrassment, towards Charlie, which surfaces in their language. Charlie’s interactions with his family are designed to make readers understand his struggle, but the overt language without proper opposition makes readers believe his family’s shameful perspective.

In the end, the most important language that casts shame on mental handicap comes from Charlie himself. After the operation but before he knows that he will decline mentally, Charlie is vigorous in arguing that he was a complete person before the operation. He is enraged by the scientists who treat him as their sole creation, craving for them to see him as important with or without intelligence. But, after he learns that he will return to his original state, he loses this understanding tone. As he accepts his return to retardation, he too loses respect for himself. There is no pragmatism, no acceptance that he will continue to be a good and important person after his IQ declines. Rather, he says “For the first time, I’m afraid of the future,” and describes other handicapped people as “never having been fully alive”. (Keyes 237, 213) The language he uses to describe his return to retardation is unhelpful, almost disrespectful of his future self. This is where Keyes fails to make Charlie a hero for the mentally handicapped. If readers were supposed to digest Charlie as being a complex before and after the operation, Charlie would have to value his retarded self. But Charlie is immensely afraid of his movement towards retardation, as he too believes it will make him less valuable. Giving in to what others have told him all his life, he too believes it will make him less human

Many claim that *Flowers for Algernon* is intended to give complexity and value to handicapped people. And at first glance, one could perceive this as true. It would have been possible for *Flowers for Algernon* to have been a novel that truly, deeply respected mental disability. But, as Cline puts it, “(...) his [Charlie’s] regression to his original state becomes the rhetorical villain in the novel.” Treatment of Charlie as lesser, and his heartbreaking belief that he too is lesser while handicapped, leave readers believing this incorrect clause. If Keyes wrote Charlie to be more accepting of his regression, perhaps readers would become more understanding and respectful of mentally handicapped people in their lives. Unfortunately the unending derogatory language used by nearly every character is too strong a literary feature to outweigh our meager, uncommon belief that Charlie Gordon was, or ever will be, normal.

## Works Cited

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