

Jacob Hernandez

D. Park

ELA Per 3-4

Oct 18, 2016

### Society's Guide to Rating "Normal"

Mental illness is a very peculiar subject to discuss. The medical practices that were applied to "help" the mentally ill are horrifying and the actions we take today to help them is doing little to nothing. Daniel Keyes' fictional short story, "Flowers For Algernon," is about Charlie Gordon, a man who becomes a genius after a clinical trial when he was once considered mentally retarded. Intelligence was something that Charlie has wanted since his adolescence, but when he receives his lifelong dream, he realizes that he becomes an outlier among his friends, co-workers, even the men who made him smart. After Algernon, the mouse subject tested before Charlie, loses his intelligence, Charlie realizes that he will soon follow suite and tries his best to preserve his intelligence. The theme that "Flowers For Algernon" portrays is society's standards of normalization corrupts perspectives because many parts of the story deal with how society views the mentally ill, which is in a negative perspective, and others who are not "normal". Society's standards of normalization corrupts perspectives is shown through the judgement of the time the story takes place, Charlie's own perspective(s), and the rejection that is brought onto people through society's "standards".

To start, "Flowers For Algernon" shows society's standards of normalization corrupts perspectives through the judgement at the time. The setting of the story is established in the 1960's. According to "progris riport 2", Charlie writes, "... did it over 10 times with difernt

amazed and Algernon won every time. I didn't know that mice were so smart. Maybe that's because Algernon is a white mouse. Maybe white mice are smarter than other mice." (pg. 286). During this time, people were judged by the color of their skin and if you were colored, then you were inferior to white people. Charlie's statement "Maybe white mice are smarter than other mice." leads to the theme because it shows how he has soaked up the "standard" that white people are superior than colored people, without even taking a second to reconsider. One night Charlie was eating at a restaurant and everyone (including himself) was laughing at a dishwasher boy who dropped a lot of plates. He writes, "As his vacant eyes moved across the crowd of amused onlookers, he slowly mirrored their smiles and finally broke into an uncertain grin at the joke which he obviously 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. They were laughing at him because he was mentally retarded." (pg. 299). This gives us insight on how the mentally ill were treated at the time. This judgemental perspective is seen today as well. This relates to the main theme because it shows us how the mentally ill were judged, labeled, and treated because of their illness. Therefore, judgement is part of society's standards and it often corrupts one's own perspective.

In addition, the theme of the story, society's standards of normalization corrupts perspectives, can also be viewed through Charlie's own perspective before and after the surgery. In the beginning of the story, Charlie takes tests to see if he will be used for the operation that will amplify his intelligence. In "progris report 3" Charlie states, "I told them because all my life I wanted to be smart and not dumb. But it's very hard to be smart." (pg. 286). This lets us explore Charlie as a character. It lets us see that he is desperate to be smart, but he lacks his own

perspective. If he wanted to be smart so bad, he would have said something positive after that, such as: "...but i stil wunt to trie." or "...but ill do watevr it takes." This statement shows that while Charlie knows that intelligence is something that he wants, his perspective could be blocked by society's standards that he has faced in the past. Charlie reacted differently than everyone else when he noticed that he was laughing at a mentally retarded boy who dropped dishware. He states, "Suddenly, I was furious at myself and all those who were smirking at him. I jumped up and shouted, "Shut up! Leave him alone! It's not his fault he can't understand! He can't help what he is! But for God's sake... he's still a human being!"(pg. 299). This gives us information on how Charlie's perspective changed after his surgery. Because Charlie's cognition met the normal person's, it exceeds it but still passes it, his perspective was just like a normal person's. He laughed at the boy, but caught himself and realized that he had followed everyone else. We can use Charlie's own perspective(s) to support the theme, society's standards of normalization corrupts perspectives.

Finally, the theme can be analyzed through rejection because of society's "standards". It seems that society rejects you if you are too dumb, but it also rejects you if you are too smart. In one of Charlie's journal entries, he claims, "It's a funny thing I never knew that Joe and Frank and the others liked to have me around all the time to make fun of me. Now I know what it means when they say "to pull a Charlie Gordon." I'm ashamed."(pg. 293). Charlie is rejected because of his mental disability. His co-workers reject him and use him as a tool for their amusement because of his problems. This can also apply to other mentally ill people who are rejected by society. While Charlie becomes more intelligent, he also becomes an outlier amongst society. Sometime later in the story, Charlie explains, "This intelligence has driven a wedge

between me and all the people I once knew and loved. Before, they laughed at me and despised me for my ignorance and dullness; now they hate me for my knowledge and understanding.”(pg. 297). This shows that society has certain standards that they label people “normal” if they aren’t too dumb and if they aren’t too smart. Charlie doesn’t know where he stands in society because he was rejected when he was dull, and he is still rejected when he is intelligent. This information supports the theme by showing that people don’t have to be dumb to not be considered normal by society. Anything, and anyone, who is different is not normal to society.

In conclusion, the message of *Flowers for Algernon* is society’s standards of normalization corrupts perspectives. The theme can be viewed throughout the story by showing examples of the judgement of the time, Charlie’s perspective(s), and the rejection that is brought onto people through society’s “standards”. This theme is significant because “*Flowers for Algernon*” basically shows how the mentally ill were treated back then, but it can also be applied to today. Society tends to turn down mentally ill people just because they are different in a odd way. According to USA today, “...the amount of hospital beds for mentally ill has dropped 34.5% since 1995...”, maybe even more since the time the article was posted. We need to focus more on helping the mentally ill because they are people, not animals or test subjects. Every person is born with the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.