

FLOWERS FOR ALGERNON

Close Reading Worksheet One
Progress Reports 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8

Answer these questions in the necessary detail in your workbook.

Progress Reports, 1, 2, 3, and 4

1. In the first progress report, you meet Charlie Gordon. List at least two facts about him.
2. Report what performance test Algernon can complete.
3. List the three types of tests Charlie is given.

Progress Report 5

4. Give at least one possible negative result that the experimental operation could have.

Progress Reports 6 and 7

5. Give Charlie's reasons for wanting to "get smart."

Progress Report 8

6. Explain the importance of the following quotations in terms of plot or character:
 - a. "I hate that mouse."
 - b. "Algernon looks like he might be smart permanent."
 - c. "He really pulled a Charlie Gordon that time."
 - d. "Its not you Nemurs worryd about."
7. Charlie writes in this report, "They're my friends and they really like me."
 - a. Who specifically is he talking about?
 - b. Explain the irony in his statement.
8. Charlie is able to remember how he began to attend night classes. Tell why this incident is significant.
9. Why is Charlie sorry for Algernon?
10. Given Charlie's reports so far, describe his personality, and give the clues on which you based your description.

Application

Test-taking can be frightening or challenging. Explain in a letter to a friend or as a recollection in your journal how you felt before taking a really important test. (It may have been a test of physical agility, a driver's test, a written test, or a job interview.) Include your thoughts and feelings after the test was over.

•TEACHER'S GUIDE Flowers for Algernon

Package prepared by
Dr. Thelma Devoe
Bunker Hill Community College
Charlestown, Ma.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Daniel Keyes was born in 1927 in Brooklyn, New York, the setting of *Flowers for Algernon*. As soon as he turned eighteen, he enlisted in the United States Maritime Service and served in the last months of World War II. In 1947 he returned home and attended Brooklyn College. After graduation Keyes worked briefly as an editor and as a co-owner of a photography studio, finally taking up teaching. He taught first at the high school level. After taking a master's degree in English, he left New York and became a college teacher in Michigan and Ohio. In 1972 he became a professor of English at Ohio University, where he has also directed the creative writing center. Daniel Keyes is married and has two children.

MAJOR WORKS

In addition to *Flowers for Algernon*, Keyes has published two novels and a volume of non-fiction.

- *The Touch* (1968) Barney Stark finds his marriage and personal life crumbling when he becomes ill from radioactive contamination.
- *The Fifth Sally* (1980) Derry, the narrator, tells us how and why Sally Porter came to suffer from a "split personality," in which five different selves inhabit her.
- *The Minds of Billy Milligan* (1981) Keyes here tells the true story of a man acquitted of a violent crime because he was found to contain over twenty separate personalities.

CHIEF CHARACTERISTICS

Daniel Keyes' writing, both fiction and non-fiction, is concerned with two main themes: the sufferings of the mentally retarded and mentally disturbed, and the hostility of society toward those who are different by reason of mental or physical condition. In *The Touch* and *Flowers of Algernon*, Keyes makes the point that most people are hostile toward the unfamiliar. When Charlie Gordon is young, he is mocked for his retardation; yet, as he grows more intelligent, others refuse to adjust their stereotype of him. The greatest suffering for Charlie is the pain and loneliness imposed on him by the unwillingness of most others to reach out to him.

Keyes attempts to explore the causes for his characters' mental conditions. In Charlie Gordon's case, he examines not the retardation itself but the childhood scars that prevent Charlie from being a well-adjusted person, even when he is at the height of his intellectual powers. Keyes' later books, *The Fifth Sally* and *The Minds of Billy Milligan*, are especially concerned with the roots of mental illness. His psychological focus has led Keyes from science fiction to more traditional fiction and, finally, to case studies drawn from real life.

Keyes' unusual subject matter is matched by his experiments in literary form. By using the journal form in *Flowers for Algernon*, he forces his readers to see events from Charlie's point of view and challenges their perceptions and powers of inference. He also makes the changes in Charlie's mental powers far more vivid and dramatic by shifting to a third person narrator. This effort to enter the mental world of people very different from the ordinary is carried even farther in his later work.

RELATED READING

- John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men* (1937). A retarded man's goodness suggests new hope, but he proves unable to cope with the realities of the world around him.
- Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (1932). A future society is capable of creating whatever level of intelligence it wishes in its people but not of making them truly happy.
- Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962). Like *Flowers for Algernon*, this story of oppression in a mental hospital is told through the eyes of one of the patients. Both books have been made into films (the film of *Algernon* is called *Charlie*) and may be compared to a number of other movies about mental illness, abnormality, and the role of medical science, such as, *David and Lisa*, *Whose Life Is It, Anyway?*, and *The Elephant Man*.

POSTREADING WRITING ASSIGNMENT

The former Charlie asks the enlightened or more intelligent Charlie, "Who's to say that your light is better than my darkness?" Considering Charlie at the peak of his intelligence and performance, answer that question. In a well-organized essay, state and develop your thesis, referring to specific events and quotes to defend your opinion.