

Flowers for Algernon

Grades 7-8

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Aims of the Unit

Flowers for Algernon has been widely taught throughout North America for more than a quarter of a century, and for good reason. First of all, it is generally not difficult reading. Of course, students need to know some basic terms from psychology, but these can easily be explained by the teacher as the novel is being read. Secondly, the novel becomes more profound as the reader digs more deeply into it. It is a very complex novel, which can be understood on a variety of simpler levels. This makes it challenging even for the more gifted students, while weaker students can enjoy it at a simpler level.

This unit provides teaching notes which analyze the elements of the novel, quizzes, fun activities, and suggestions for writing and discussion. Although the novel may be taught successfully to bright or eager students at the grades 7 and 8 levels, it does contain some explicit sexual scenes and is therefore probably more appropriate in the first few years of secondary school.

These notes are designed for the teacher teaching the novel. Teachers may reproduce any of these notes to give to students. It would be preferable, however, for teachers to use these notes for their own knowledge and to incorporate them into classroom discussion.

Biography of Daniel Keyes

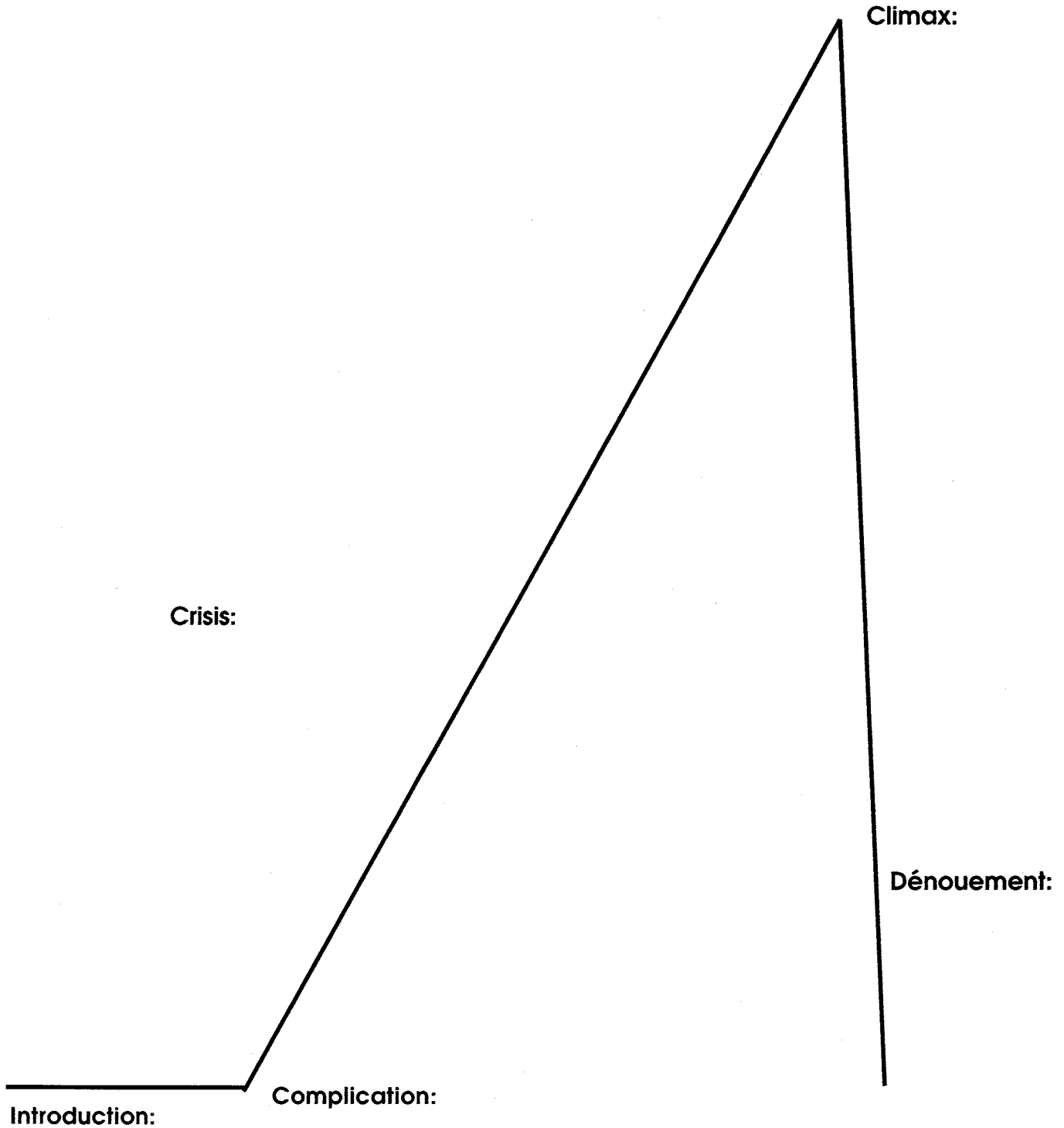
Daniel Keyes was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1927. After a stint as a ship's purser beginning at age 17, he received his degree in psychology at Brooklyn College. After graduation, he worked as a fiction editor before returning to university to pursue graduate studies in English and American literature. He taught creative writing at Wayne State University and at the University of Ohio.

Flowers for Algernon was conceived as a short story while Keyes worked as a teacher. "What would happen if it were possible to increase human intelligence artificially?" Keyes asked himself. When he met and spoke to a mentally challenged young man, he thought how wonderful it would be if such an idea could become reality. "After many false starts," says Keyes, "I discovered the technique of the Progress Reports. With these three elements: the idea, the character, and the narrative strategy, I was well on my way."



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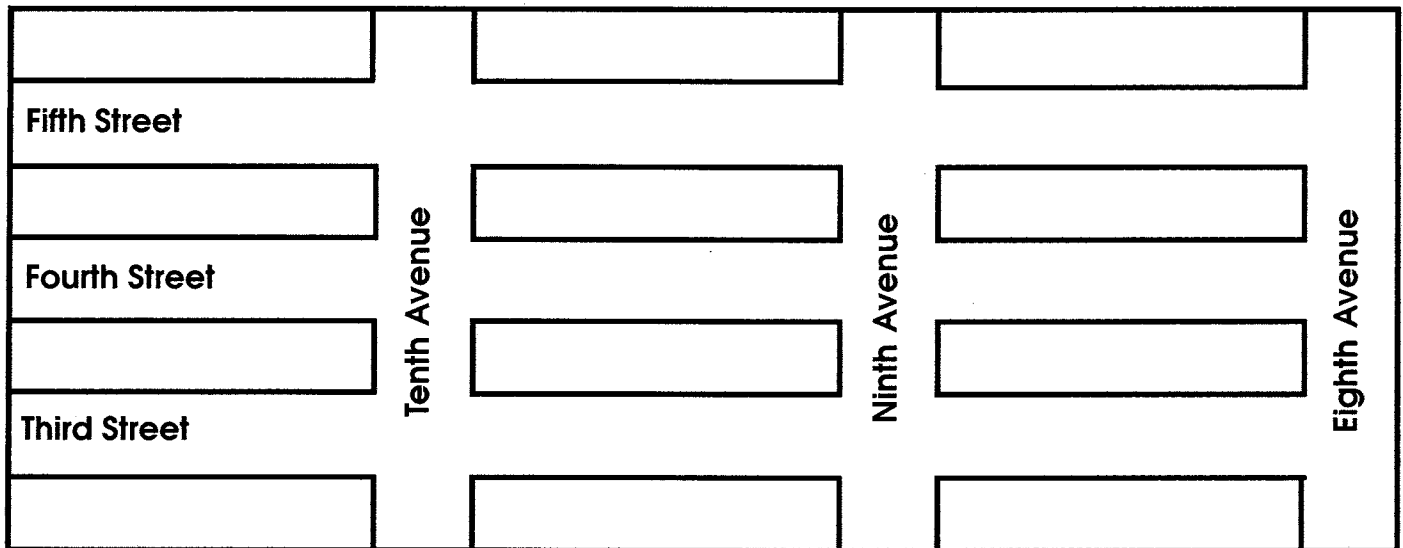


The Setting for Flowers For Algernon

For the most part, *Flowers for Algernon* is set in New York City at the time the novel was written in the late 1950s or early 1960s.

There are several references in the novel to street names, so it is important to note that New York City is built on a grid pattern in which generally streets running east to west are called *streets* and those running north to south are called *avenues*. The streets and avenues are usually numbered, such as *Ninth Street*, *Tenth Street*, *Eighth Avenue*, *Ninth Avenue*. Thus, *Eighth Avenue* is three (long) blocks west of *Fifth Avenue* and *42nd Street* is four blocks north of *38th Street*. There are exceptions to this rule, such as thoroughfares named *Broadway* or *Park Avenue*, both of which run north and south.

The pattern of streets would look something like the following:



The city of New York is made up of five boroughs:

- Brooklyn is the most southerly borough and is located on Long Island
- Queens is north of Brooklyn and is also on Long Island
- Richmond to the west of Long Island is located on Staten Island
- Manhattan, north of Brooklyn, is located on the island of Manhattan
- The Bronx, north of Manhattan, is the only borough on the mainland.

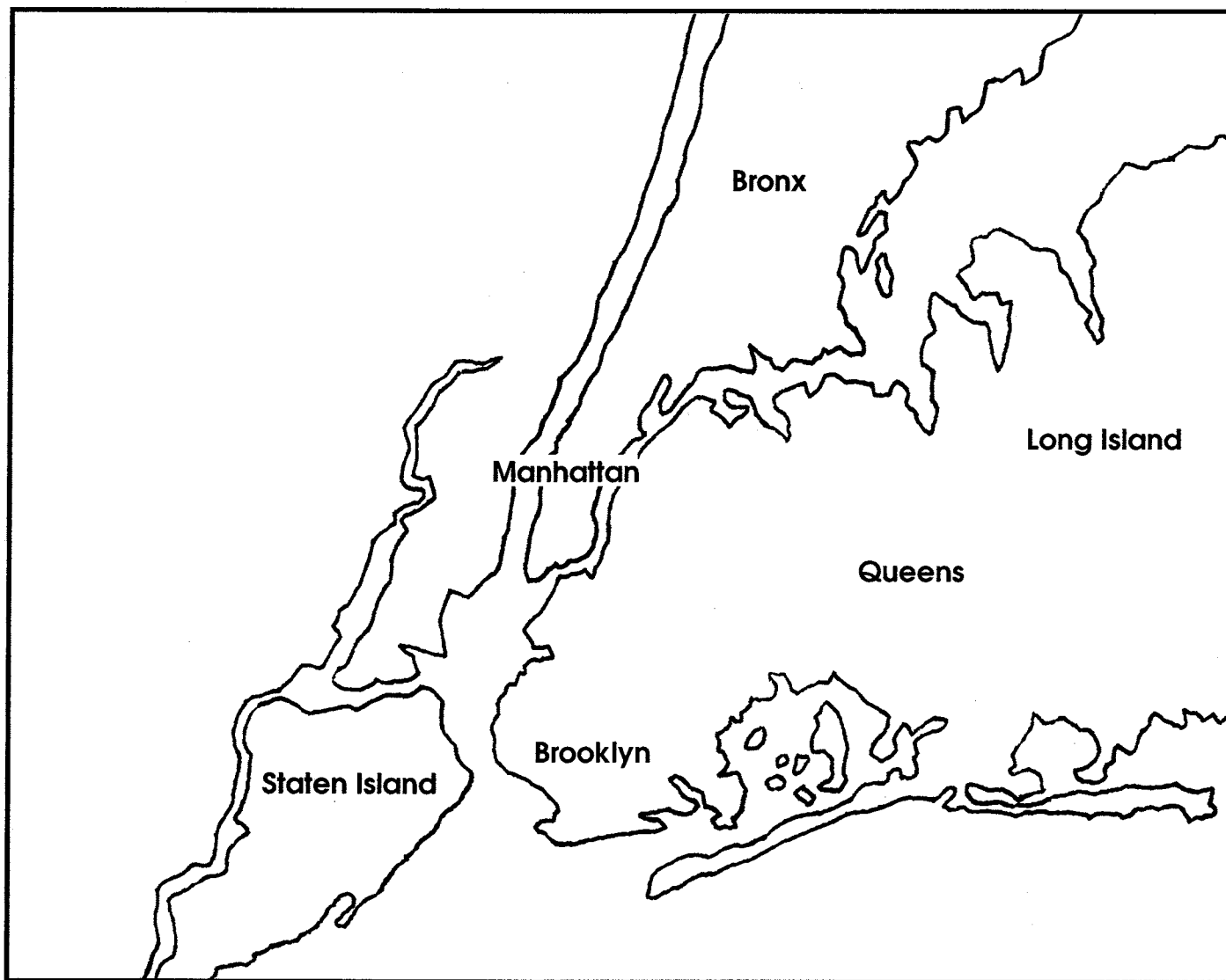
Many of the incidents in the novel occur in three of these boroughs—Manhattan, Brooklyn and the Bronx—so it is important for students to have some idea of the locations of these boroughs.

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The map below shows the city of New York.



Charlie's boyhood home and the house where his mother and sister continue to live is in Brooklyn. Charlie's father, Matt, opens his barber shop in the Bronx. Charlie's apartment is on 43rd Street and 10th Avenue in Manhattan, as presumably are the Beekman Institute, Donner's Bakery and Alice Kinnian's apartment. Charlie visits Central Park several times (once with Alice), also located in Manhattan. The Warren Home is located in Warren, Long Island.

In addition to New York, there is one other setting—Chicago, where Charlie attends the convention with Professor Nemur and Dr. Strauss. Note that the movie version, *Charly*, sets the novel in Boston.