

Advanced Placement in  
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

**Flowers for Algernon**

by Daniel Keyes

written by Kay Hampson

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# Flowers for Algernon

## Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. support the following major themes in the novel with evidence from the text
  - a. a tension exists between the emotions and intellect
  - b. the past has the power to affect the present
  - c. society mistreats and misunderstands the mentally challenged
2. identify significant incidents and comments that signal the author's themes.
3. analyze Keyes's techniques of character's development
4. examine the use of the following narrative techniques and devices:
  - a. the journal format
  - b. the changes in Charlie's use of language
  - c. flashbacks
5. explain changes in tone in the novel
6. discuss Keyes's use of sexuality to reflect emotional growth
7. analyze the use of foreshadowing, irony, simile, metaphor, and allusion in the book
8. trace the development and evolution of symbols in the text, particularly the window and the knife
9. trace the development of the connection between Charlie and Algernon and explain how it contributes to the text as a whole
10. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition Exam
11. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition Exam
12. offer a close reading of *Flowers for Algernon* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel

## LECTURE NOTES

### THE HISTORY OF *FLOWERS FOR ALGERNON*

*Flowers for Algernon* was originally a short story. Daniel Keyes, who left his position as associate editor at Marvel Comics to teach high-school English, used his experience working with special-needs students to write “Flowers for Algernon.” The story was initially submitted to the magazine *Galaxy Science Fiction* in 1958, but when the editor asked Keyes to alter the ending—having Charlie retain his intelligence and marry Alice Kinnian—Keyes refused. “Flowers for Algernon,” with Keyes’s intended ending, was soon after published in the April 1959 issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. It was an instant success, and it received the Hugo Award for Best Short Story in 1960.

Between 1961 and 1965, Keyes expanded the story into a novel and received an offer of publication from Doubleday Publishers. However, like *Galaxy Science Fiction*, Doubleday wanted Keyes to give the story a happy ending, and Keyes—who still maintained that such an ending was not appropriate for the novel—once again refused. After returning the publisher’s advance, Keyes sent the book to five other publishers; each one rejected the book. However, Harcourt, Inc. finally agreed to publish the novel without changes, and since its initial publication, *Flowers for Algernon* has not gone out of print. The novel won the Nebula Award for Best Novel in 1966, and in 2000, Daniel Keyes was presented with the Science Fiction Writers of America Author Emeritus Award.

### SCIENCE FICTION

Science fiction is a genre that is difficult to define, primarily because it encompasses several subgenres and often overlaps with other categories of literature, television, and film. Generally speaking, however, the plots of science fiction works involve advanced, often fantastic, scientific research and innovations. These may include time travel, space shuttles and flying machines, advanced information technology, machines with artificial intelligence, and bioengineering. The settings in the science fiction genre also vary, and the story may be set on present-day earth, an alternate reality, outer space, a dystopian community, or a post-apocalyptic world. The genre is so broad that it can encompass novels and films widely recognized as science fiction—such as H.G. Wells’s *War of the Worlds* and George Lucas’s *Star Wars*—as well as those that may be classified primarily under another genre, such as George Orwell’s *1984* and Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*.

*Flowers for Algernon* was written as a work of science fiction, and Keyes intended for it to be published in the *Galaxy Science Fiction* magazine. The novel examines the implications of using scientific principles to study human beings: How can a great disparity between the level of emotional and intellectual intelligence be detrimental? Is an individual with a mental disability considered less human than a person with normal awareness and mental aptitude? What role does sexual development play in an individual’s life? How important is social interactivity in an individual’s life?

# Flowers for Algernon

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1. What is immediately noticeable about the form and structure of this novel?

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2. Who is Charlie Gordon?

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3. Judging by this first entry, what is Charlie's personality like? What seems to be the main focus of his life?

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4. For what purpose does the doctor need Charlie?

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5. Why does Charlie hope that Dr. Strauss will use him?

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6. Why does a "journal" work as the form for this story?

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5. What is the significance of Charlie’s first memory—to the plot? To the reader’s understanding of Charlie’s character?

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6. In what way does the phrase, “They are all good friends to me” evoke sympathy for Charlie?

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7. How is the flashback an effective literary technique?

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8. For what reasons would Professor Nemur suggest that Charlie attend therapy once he starts remembering his past through his dreams? What aspect of Charlie’s development does therapy represent?

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**April 24**

1. What does Charlie’s overhearing the conversation between Drs. Strauss and Nemur suggest about his development?

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2. Who supports sharing the findings at the convention? Who does not? What do their opinions suggest about their characters?

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3. How has Charlie’s view of Dr. Strauss and Professor Nemur changed?

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**June 16**

1. Cite the instances of the number four in the text, and explain what it may symbolize.

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2. What effect does the image of Charlie and Algernon sipping beer and eating pretzels while watching the Yankees game have on the reader?

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**July 9**

1. How does Keyes utilize foreshadowing in this entry?

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**4:30AM**

1. How does Charlie find the answer to his question?

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**August 26**

1. What is the “Algernon-Gordon Effect”?

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2. What predictions can be made about Charlie based upon the hypothesis?

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