

To what extent is happiness related with intelligence over the character Charlie Gordon of the novel ‘Flowers for Algernon’?

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## Abstract

In the novel ‘Flowers for Algernon’, written by Daniel Keyes, the story of Charlie Gordon who is diagnosed with mental retardation who undergoes an experiment to increase his IQ is told. The novel consists of the progress reports which Charlie Gordon writes throughout his journey of getting smarter. I decided to research the question: “To what extent is happiness related with intelligence over the character Charlie Gordon of the novel ‘Flowers for Algernon’?”. I studied if there is a direct relationship – mostly expected as a positive one - between happiness and intelligence,

Because I like science fictional novels and I find the experiments made on humans interesting, I chose to work on the novel ‘Flowers for Algernon’. I chose to write on whether there is a relationship between happiness and intelligence level since it can clearly be observed from this novel over Charlie’s change. This is an outstanding issue to write about since in the novel, the change of Charlie’s mood, affected by the given operation over weights the other themes.

I reached a conclusion that happiness is not directly proportional with intelligence. The happiness of a human being can be destroyed if the ongoing order of that person is disturbed or changed. In the novel, Charlie’s happiness is not affected because his intelligence increased but because his order is disturbed by creating a new world for him and making him live in that world that he is not used to. Intelligence may bring sadness rather than happiness contrary to what is expected.

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## Introduction

It is always thought that there is a relation between intelligence and happiness. The most common thought would be that the intelligent people are happier than less intelligent people. This situation is caused by the fact that intelligence is important for a human being to continue his life. For survival of a human being from the difficulties of the outside world, intelligence constitutes a great advantage. Since intelligence elicits problem solving ability to an individual, it is highly needed for everyday life. There is also another side of intelligence that is tempting for a person to have. The people who possess high level of intelligence are more likely to reach their dreams and achieve their life goals because they have ability to think of finding ideas to construct a way to their accomplishments. There are some of the reasons why happiness is highly associated with intelligence. However, does intelligence always bring happiness? Is there really a direct relationship between happiness and intelligence? In the novel called ‘Flowers for Algernon’ the relation between happiness and intelligence can be investigated over the operation that Charlie Gordon underwent to increase his IQ level from sixty eight to a hundred and eighty five. Therefore my research question is: “To what extent is happiness related with intelligence over the character Charlie Gordon of the novel ‘Flowers for Algernon’?”

## Body

The protagonist of the novel ‘Flowers for Algernon’ Charlie Gordon is a thirty two year old man with mental handicap with an IQ level of sixty eight. He lives in New York City alone not having a clue about his parents’ whereabouts. He works at Donner’s Bakery as a janitor and delivery guy. His mental disability causes him to be an easily trusting, friendly, credulous man who is unaware of the ongoing dangers of the world and its wild nature. His low intelligence level also affects his way of thinking; his credulity purifies his thoughts from malevolence. His ambition on reading, writing and becoming smart like other people around him is the reason why he attends the classes of Alice Kinnian who works at Beekman College for slow adults. “*Then Miss Kinnian come to see me and she brought me some magazines to reed...She likes me a lot becaus I try very hard to lern evrything not like some of the pepul at the adult center who dont reely care. She wants me to get smart. I know.*” (Keyes, 9)

Charlie's mental deficiency leads to immaturity in his behaviour. His childish actions are the things which outstand the most about him which causes the cruel attitude of his coworkers at the Donner's Bakery towards him. Their unpitying behaviour vary from making fun of him to leaving him at a bar all by himself, not considering the consequences that may occur like him being lost or dying in a street corner. It can clearly be seen in the novel that their behaviour exceeds the limits of mocking or teasing but reaches to a dangerous level. The people whom he sees as "friends who like him" act as if Charlie is less of a human being than they are as the result of his disability. Whenever Charlie does something silly because of his retardation, they start making jokes about it. Charlie's reaction to that situation is expectedly moderate. He sees the people around him as well intended as he is because of his childish nature. "*We had a lot of fun at the bakery today. Joe Carp said hey look where Charlie had his operashun what did they do Charlie put some brains in. I was going to tell them about me getting smart but I remembered Prof Nemur said no. Then Frank Reilly said what did you do Charlie open a door the hard way. That made me laff.*" (Keyes, 16) When they leave him at the bar all alone by himself, he tries to find excuses like they may be looking for him; he cannot see their negative intensions toward himself. Even in such circumstances, he does not feel sadness or distress because his low intelligence level averts him to understand what really is going on around him. He perceives his coworkers' laughs and jokes as friendly gestures towards him which show their love. "*Their my friends and they really like me.*" (Keyes, 16)

This situation in the novel can be adapted to the societies in real life too. In societies, mentally retarded people are seen as secondary class people and even though they need to be treated with extra sensitivity, they are treated with disrespect and mercilessness. They encounter discrimination in every aspect of life like health, education, work life etc. In societies with lack of education, sometimes they are used as tools for entertainment by several people since they are not considered as human beings or individuals. The happiness of the retarded people is closely related to the environment they live in. For retarded people to feel more comfortable about themselves, their families should be really sensitive about their conditions; they have to accept the fact that that person is different from the other people and should be treated with susceptibility. Therefore, the individual himself can build awareness towards his disability and be prepared for the negative approach from the outside world. In the novel 'Flowers for Algernon' a great part of the sufferings of Charlie after the surgery are because of his family's attitude towards his disability, especially his mother's. It is really hard for him to accede that before he was intelligent, people thought of him as less of a human being than themselves,

because he is content with his disability, unaware of his predicament among the intelligent but less human. Because of this reason, he gets furious at Nemur and Strauss for them acting like he did not exist when he was retarded before the experiment. *"It might be said that Charlie Gordon did not really exist before this experiment... I don't know why I resented it so intensely to have them think of me as something newly minted in their private treasury, but it was – I am certain- echoes of that idea that had been sounding in the chambers of my mind from the time we arrived in Chicago. I wanted to get up and show everyone what a fool he was, to shout at him; I'm a human being, a person – with parents and memories and a history – and I was before you ever wheeled me into that operating room!"* (Keyes, 112) Since his mother cannot accept his situation and acts as if he is a normal child, in his lack of understanding, he has an awareness of his own inefficiency and urging feeling of willing to get smart to be like other people around him. At this point, his dissatisfaction does not rise from within but is based on the treatment of the people around him, especially the closest, his mother. Even such situation does not create unhappiness for him. Also, after his operation, Charlie considers the old Charlie as a different entity outside of him. While he writes about the memories that he remembers from the past to his progress reports, he mentions himself as "Charlie" from the third person view point as if he were a different person. That also shows his annoyance towards the times when he had a mental retardation.

Apparently, Charlie's disability cannot be tolerated by his family. Especially his mother and sister are very dim sighted and far from sensitivity about his condition. Before his sister Norma was born, his mother used to give love, warmth and care to Charlie denying his mental disability and believing that he will be just like the other children. She is obsessed with the idea of Charlie being normal and cannot accept the fact that Charlie has a serious condition yet unaware of her sons overweighting human qualities which she lacks as a mother herself. After his sister Norma, whom his mother is really keen on, was born, she starts to consider him as an obstacle in front of Norma's development, which builds malevolence on her towards his son Charlie. *"As she made that protective gesture, I saw the second double image: my mother, heavy with my sister, holding me less, warming me less with her voice and touch, protecting me less against anyone who dared to say I was subnormal."* (Keyes, 91) She mistreats him when she sees something that bothers Norma that he has done. She expects him to behave better than his capacity allows, and if he fails at this, she starts slapping him. Eventually, she does not want him in his house and sends him to stay with Uncle Herman. This situation leaves great damage in Charlie's subconscious, though does not affect his life

very much before his operation. The reason for this is Charlie's inability of appraising and deliberating. Even though it does not make him heavyhearted most of the time, he builds a fear towards his mother. After the experiment, his memory also improves and he starts to recall memories from the past. Here, it can clearly be seen that his childhood memories remain solidly in his subconscious. As his IQ level gets higher, the old memories start to outstand and show their effect on the new Charlie's life with as a consequence of his developing awareness and judgment ability.

As seen from these examples, Charlie is not much confronted with sadness before he goes through the surgery. That is because he does not have the ability to reason and draw conclusions about events happening around him. His situation is somewhat like 'ignorance is bliss' since his mental retardation averts his intellectual abilities like evaluating. Even though he is not comfortable about his state of retardation because of his mother's obsession of him being a normal child like other kids, this is not a source of unhappiness for him.

His situation can also be related to real life with the relationship with age and happiness. For example, it can be said that a child encounters less sadness than an adult as a result of his credulous nature. An elementary school child differs from an adult by means of level of intelligence, social and emotional development etc. People go through an improvement period while they grow up; with the events they encounter, they learn to maintain their survival in life. The life they experience brings them intellectual, social and emotional development with itself which is the process called "maturation". Evidently, maturation brings out ability of judgment and drawing conclusions about the happenings around a person and that leads to sadness. Therefore, it could be said that people have to grow up in order to get sad, which is why children does not encounter much sadness. Charlie's mental development can be identified with a child's brain at that point. His change from a retard to a genius symbolizes his growing up into adulthood.

After Charlie's intelligence increases, he starts to face some difficulties. Firstly, he realizes that his coworkers were always making fun of him before his IQ was increased by the experiment. When Charlie and his coworkers went to a party one day, they force him to dance with a girl called Ellen and disgrace him every time he falls in front of all the people at the party. After the operation, with intelligence coming over him, when Charlie remembers the day, he realizes that the people whom he has always seen as his friends were actually mocking him and using his disability as a subject for their entertainment. "*I never knew before that Joe*

*and Frank and the others liked to have me around just to make fun of me. Now I know what they mean when they say “to pull a Charlie Gordon.” I’m ashamed.”* (Keyes, 30) Facing this truth starts to cause him pain and that leads to him experiencing a feeling that he is not very used to; anger. Before his alteration, since he did not have much of an ability of evaluating the happenings around him and because of his short time memory, he did not use to experience much sadness. “*As he starts to turn pages, he feels like crying but he does not know why. What is there to feel sad about? The fuzzy feeling comes and goes, and now he looks forward to the pleasure of the brightly colored pictures in the comic book that he has gone through thirty-forty times.*” (Keyes, 46) His growing intelligence initiated his feelings of anguish and distress towards people and the events around him because he gained the ability of judgment. That started the negative feelings and desperation that he feels.

Another reason why he starts to feel down is that people starting to move away from him. Before the experiment almost everyone around him seemed to be friends with him just to make him a subject for their entertainment yet now they started to alienate and avoid him. For example when he invites Frank and Joe to diner, they turn him down finding pointless excuses. Also, he realizes that his expectations that people would be proud of him after the experiment and like him more was all a delusion. “*People at the bakery are changing. Not only ignoring me. I can feel the hostility...The rotten thing is that all of the pleasure is gone because the others resent me...People are not proud of me the way I expected, not at all.*” (Keyes, 47) He starts to get really lonely and now realizes that he is abandoned. “*I hate to go home to that lonely room.*” (Keyes, 49) In addition to all this, to his sorrow, he ends up getting fired from Donner’s Bakery. Charlie is now intelligent enough to be aware of the situation that this is caused because of the change that came over him after the surgery. With his changing IQ level, his personality also starts to change too. Before the surgery, he used to be a warm-hearted, credulous person, which now he starts to lose as his intelligence starts to dominate his thoughts and actions. Eventually he loses this affectionate character and turns into an arrogant and cold person. This is because of his efforts to create a defense mechanism against the outside world that he has just met and which he can see through and evaluate as he had never been capable of doing before.

After the operation, Charlie’s intellectual growth eventually surpasses his emotional growth which also goes through changes as the result of the operation and for this reason he faces difficulties in his social emotional life. “*The more intelligent you become the more problems you’ll have Charlie. Your intellectual growth is going to outstrip your emotional growth. And*

*I think you'll find as you progress there will be many things you'll want to talk to me about."* (Keyes, 33). It can easily be observed by evaluating his relationship with Alice Kinnian. Alice Kinnian is a teacher who works at Beekman College and teaches literacy skills to mentally retarded people. She is a kind, warm hearted teacher who treats her pupils with care, taking genuine satisfaction from her work. When she sees Charlie's great eagerness on reading and writing, she recommends him to Nemur and Strauss's experiment. For the retarded Charlie, Alice is an affectionate teacher who always encourages his enthusiasm on learning. However, after the experiment, as things progress, he starts to see the beauty under her benign character and this initiates his feelings for her. Every time he tries to approach Alice as a healthy man, he feels the existence of "The Former Charlie" between them and encounters panics and nausea. This situation ignores the intimacy he wants to form between him and Alice. "*But with the freedom came a sadness. I wanted to be in love with her. I wanted to overcome my emotional and sexual fears to marry, have children and settle down. Now it's impossible. I'm just as far away from Alice with an IQ of 185 as I was when I had an IQ of 70 and this time we both know it.*" (Keyes, 88) This is caused by the memories that lay under his subconscious. When he was a child, his mother Rose had always been so strict about sexuality and reacted harshly. Whenever Charlie showed a curiosity about sexuality, Rose's response was yelling at him and mistreating him. That not only built a fear in Charlie towards sexuality but the thought that it was wrong and forbidden as well. He had the misconception that when he got involved in such things in his life, his mother would punish him with her slaps. In his relationship with Alice, how a great trauma this has been for him is observed. Sadly the feeling does not leave Charlie easily even when he gets smarter, yet gets even deeper. "*He feels that my rapid intellectual development had deceived me into thinking I could live a normal emotional life. But I have got to accept the fact that the fears and blocks triggered in these sexual situations reveal that emotionally I'm still an adolescent-sexually retarded.*" (Keyes, 71) Before his operation, because of his short time memory and disability of using his brain effectively, these memories only laid under his subconscious, yet with his developing awareness, understanding, the acute sense of evaluation and judgment, they all start to resurface and have greater impact on his life than he could have impaired even with his increased intelligence.

At the end of the novel, the operation starts to lose its effect and Charlie slowly turns back to his original state of retardation from intelligence. Once he realizes that the transformation is taking place, he begins to suffer because he does not want to go back to the retarded Charlie.

The bondage between intelligence and awareness creates sadness for the latter Charlie who deteriorates as the time passes. Though as the alteration progresses and he goes back to the old Charlie losing his intelligence, he begins to lack the sense of awareness formerly and starts to be happy again. Him taking his job back at Donner's Bakery and his coworkers Frank, Joe and Gimpy starting to be nice and protective towards him after this regression emphasize his reoccurring happiness and better conditions he maintains caused by him going back to his original state.

From these examples, it can be observed that, as expected, intelligence did not bring happiness to Charlie's life but more sadness. It brought about his fears and caused his alienation which are reasons enough for the modern man to take therapies to overcome which Charlie tries to overcome all by himself. So what is the relation of happiness and intelligence? The relation between intelligence level and happiness is an important aspect of research. Generally, it can be said that intelligence is not a prerequisite for happiness. There are lots of people who have reached great success with their intelligence like Wallace Carothers, Newton, Ludwig Boltzmann, Alan Turing, though it is doubtful that they reached happiness with the intelligence they possess. Some of them even choose to end their life by themselves which is a proof for their deep depression. In his work called "In Praise of Folly" (originally called *Moria Enkomion*), Erasmus asks whether the obstacle in the way to happiness is intelligence and states that the happiest creatures in nature are the ones which live according to the flow of life, not needing much wisdom. For humanity, it can be said that the most and the least happy ones are humans because of their awareness towards life. Unfortunately, this awareness reaches at its highest intensity for the most intelligent. From this perspective, intelligence can be seen as a source for unhappiness.

## Conclusion

To find the relation between intelligence and happiness, it needs to be firstly investigated what it should be about intelligence that leads to happiness. For most cases, intelligence leads to success, therefore happiness. Since intelligent people have higher chances of making their dreams come true and achieving their goals, they are more likely to be happy. They have more chances to live in better conditions, compared to people with lower IQ level. However, not everyone who is intelligent can be successful or all of the people who are successful may not be happy either. In Charlie's condition; he was more sensuous and emotional than when

he was retarded but lacked the experience to cope with the malignant world and continue a whole new life he was not used to. Therefore, intelligence was not enough for him to be happy altogether. As a result, the main reason for Charlie to get unhappier after the operation is the fact that his awareness of his customary environment, the order that he was used to was disturbed by a touch from outside world. After that, he had difficulties in adapting himself to the new world with his newly gained intelligence. He was now a stranger in the very well-known but too strange world which he was not prepared for in his past thirty two years. Conclusively, it could be said that intelligence does not necessarily have to bring happiness to a person but instead, it is very likely to bring sadness along with the qualities and abilities it brings. May this also be the reason why many of the geniuses are insane and unhappy?

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