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## Introduction

This thesis is focused on the problem of the position of mentally disordered people in modern society from the point of view of specific literary work. It analyses how the problem is reflected in a science fiction short story (1958) and a cognominal novel (1966) *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes. Such individual components as the historical background, authenticity of the novel and the presentation of the idea are explored.

*Flowers for Algernon*, the short story (1958) and the novel (1966) were chosen for scrutiny, because of the author's experience. Using his degree in psychology (1950) and his experience with mentally disordered people, Daniel Keyes addresses the topic from a professional point of view. At the same time, he makes it easier for the understanding of an ordinary reader by using his literary talent. The goal of this thesis is a theoretical and a practical investigation of social standing of people with mental disorders in society using the example of Daniel Keyes' works. In particular the following questions are concerned:

- what literary devices the author uses to draw attention to the problem;
- if his works corresponds with reality (i.e. if the behavior and way of thinking of the main character are described believably; if the main character comes up against the social situations which are believable and likely.)
- if a literary work of such a kind is capable of drawing a reader's response.

Although this research draws primarily from *Flowers for Algernon*, both the short story and the novel by Daniel Keyes another work of Keyes *Algernon, Charlie and I: A Writer's Journey* (2000) is used as well, together with *Charlie Gordon Passes the Test of Time* (2004) by Andrea Ickes-Dunbar. The article by Andrea Ickes-Dunbar explores the popularity of *Flowers for Algernon* among deferent generations of people and their response to it. *Charlie Gordon Passes the Test of Time* helps to understand how the topic of discussion continued to be relevant through the following decades. Other minor sources are used as well.

This work is divided into the following parts: introduction, theoretical part, main body and conclusion. The theoretical part contains historical background of mental disorders and survey of literary works written in the same genre and on a similar topic. The main body contains research of compositional, morphological, syntactical and

phonological means the author uses to create his novel and make it plausible. The results of the research will be described in the conclusion of the thesis. The conclusion will be made based on the materials explored and an analysis of both Keyes' novel and the short story mentioned above.

# **I. Theoretical Part**

## **1.1 Historical background of mental retardation and its treatment**

This part introduces the history of learning about mental retardation. It has its origins in primitive society and has developed through the centuries. A more detailed description of this development can be found below.

Intellectual disability stems from several causes, among which are: innate genetic abnormality, acquired mental illnesses (Alzheimer's disease), age and physical damage to certain areas of the human's brain in consequence of casualty or violence. Individuals with different degrees of mental disorder existed from the earliest time. It is highly possible that they have existed from the moment of the appearance of Homo Sapiens. In primitive societies they were probably killed by their own clan not to be a burden for other members of a tribe. The same attitude can be seen in Ancient Greece, though the state has been regarded as the nursery of western intellectual thought. Ancient Rome and India also proposed liquidation of disabled children. It was seen as a good method for creating a healthy and strong nation. In India such a tradition existed up to the 19th century. (Scheerenberger 24) On the one hand, this practice was, no doubt, cruel. On the other hand, moral standards in those days were different from the ones we have today. The people had almost no medicine and the living conditions were adverse and constituted a threat. Caring for a child who is not capable of being useful meant putting at risk other children, most of whom were healthy and had a higher likelihood of survival. In the future these healthy children were expected to help society achieve prosperity.

However it was Ancient Greece and Rome, where first observations of people with mental disorder took place, approximately in 6th century B.C.E. These first observations were at first connected to the development of medicine itself and included works of such scholars as Pythagoras (6-5 centuries B.C.E.), Hippocrates (5-4 centuries B.C.E.) and Herophilus (4th century B.C.E.) who were interested in studying the human brain. (Scheerenberger 56) All these scientists were trying to find natural and scientific causes of mental disorders. At the same time, ethical problems connected to them and the social attitude were not discussed widely, even though the overall level of development within their civilization was relatively high for the time.

Latter on during the Medieval period the development of the scientific thought in this area was partly stopped by dominance of religious ideology and the strong position

of church in people's lives. Mental disorders were no longer seen as a result of brain damage, but as a supernatural element of personality, received either from god or from devil, depending on the religious belief a person belonged to. A vast quantity of cases when people were brutally executed because of their "demonic possession" is well documented. (Scheerenberger 138) On the other hand, more positive attitudes existed as well: "For he who is least among you all — he is the greatest." (Luke 9:46) Jesus Christ (6 B.C. - 30 A.D.) With the end of the middle ages, the first classification of mental patients appears, created by one of the first psychiatrists, Felix Plater, in the 16th century. Even so, the situation and attitude within society did changing quickly enough.

The world had been deeply indoctrinated with the image which made a mentally limited child a product and a progenitor of evil heredity and social degeneracy, a subhuman or non-human contaminant of the human race. (Dr. Henry Cobb, *Mental Retardation: Past and Present* 1)

Further analysis of mental disorders took place in France during and after the Revolution. At the beginning of the 19th century French psychiatrist Philippe Pinel began to advocate a humanist attitude towards mentally disordered people. He created another classification of brain diseases and ordered the fetters to be taken off of the patients in lunatic asylums. It must be said that in the 19th century, with industrialization, some degree of qualification became necessary. This epoch was full of new technologies and that is why people, who were able to work with these technologies, were needed. In order to prepare them for this work they were given at least a basic education. Education became a more accessible in general. It started to be popular among women. It was not extremely expensive anymore and middle class people could afford it for their children. As a result, society started to be more demanding on the mental development of an average person. At long last not only the deep forms of oligophrenia (i.e. medical term for mental retardation) became known, but also the mild ones. At this particular time the problem acquired the social overtone we are familiar with nowadays. The social situation for mentally retarded people at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century is shortly described in the following quotation. It can be clearly seen that even though this situation started getting better, it was far from completely resolved.

The attitude, however, was essentially benign and humanitarian, the institutional objectives being to provide a better environment and opportunity for improvement to impaired persons and relief to the

family and community. It becomes evident, though, that the costs of institutional expansion were meeting with resistance from legislatures and public officials. (Dr. Henry Cobb, *Mental Retardation: Past and Present* 6)

From that moment on mental disorders are researched not only from the medical but also from the pedagogical and psychological points of view. More than a century after the first forays into the different ways of treatment of mental retardation were done in order to make the life of people suffering from these disorders more comfortable, their condition can only be prevented on rare occasions, but never completely cured.

But the challenge runs deeper than court decisions; the real issue is in public attitudes and the social behavior of people in everyday life. This aspect of public relations divides into three phases: public information, public acceptance and public accommodation. (Dr. Henry Cobb, *Mental Retardation: Past and Present* 261)

It should be said that the number of people who suffer from different kinds of mental disorder has grown since the 50s and 60s, as a consequence the problem is considered to have become even greater challenge today. On the other hand, we can say that relations between retarded people and society have changed for the better. At the same time, the very core of human nature does not change much, even when regulated by law and ethics. That is the reason why the topic of social interaction of mentally retarded people with others is always of great interest.

## **1.2 Brief Medical and Sociological Surveys**

As has already been mentioned, Daniel Keyes possesses knowledge and experience in the discussed area. Of course, he uses them in spite of the fact that his short story and novel are semi fantastic. Still, they are based upon real medical reality. This reality is going to be briefly described below.

The most deep and detailed classification of mental disorders is presented by DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of mental disorders). The first edition of DSM was published in the year 1952. The manual evolved concurrently together with the evolution of our understanding in medicine and psychology. Consequently, nowadays it is already the fifth edition which is in-use. Officially it is called DSM-V. The manual is divided into five axes, according to psychological dimensions described. The following classification of mental retardation is part of DSM, axis II. There are four degrees of

mental retardation, according to the IQ of a person and his ability of social adjustment. (Braddock and Parish 53)

Mild mental retardation or (IQ 50-69)

Moderate mental Retardation (IQ 35-49)

Severe mental retardation (IQ 20-34)

Profound mental Retardation (IQ less than 20) (Krucik)

The first degree is going to be examined in more detail, as it is directly relevant to Keyes' work. Charley Gordon has an IQ of 68 and belongs to the group with mild mental retardation. This group is characterized by a defined set of symptoms, such as problems with writing and reading, difficulties with learning how to talk, sometimes - physical disability. Quite often they have some emotional disorders, although they are not aggressive. It is also almost impossible for them to build healthy relationships and, as a result, to get married or have children. To put it more scientifically and support the argument discussed, the citation from a medical article is presented below.

The essential feature of Mental Retardation is significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning that is accompanied by significant limitations in adaptive functioning in at least two of the following skill areas: communication, self-care, home living, social/interpersonal skills, use of community resources, self-direction, functional academic skills, work, leisure, health, and safety. (Mental Retardation Symptoms)

At the same time it should be mentioned that these people are fully capable of taking care of themselves. They can be taught how to communicate and can be educated to a certain extent (approximately to the level of sixth grader). Despite all the positive social changes mentioned in part 1.1, even nowadays the position of people with mental disorders needs to be improved. Presumably the most important of them is the perception of mentally retarded people in society. The attitudes towards them, held by people in different age groups, are discussed below.

It is not common for mentally disordered persons to face stigmatization in their families. Unfortunately there are situations when a retarded child encounters with cruelty and disdain from its parents. This usually happens in dysfunctional families, which are violent even with their healthy children. There are opposite situations when family is ready to look after their retarded baby, but it becomes impossible as people

with an IQ lower than 20 very often need constant professional medical care that can only be found in special asylums.

All physicians who care for children with mental retardation or developmental disabilities should remember that these patients quickly outgrow their childhoods. As they become adolescents and young adults, most of them will need professional intervention to help them become their own advocates in the health care system. (Daily, Ardinger, Holmes)

Those who try to adapt themselves to normal life can come across stigmatization on the part of other children and teenagers. It is not a secret that children are cruel to those, who have strong distinctions from them. The attitude of their peers is one of the reasons why mentally retarded children need to attend special schools, even when their IQ is close enough to normal.

The situation is different in the adult world. Nowadays employers feel not so disturbed by the idea of employing persons with different kinds of mental illnesses. Many of them share positive experience they have had with mentally retarded employees.

The study conducted by McNair Ingenuity Research among 253 small and medium-sized businesses revealed that 74 per cent of organizations that had employed someone with a mental illness said it was a positive experience. (Lucas, Clay)

On the other side, employees with mental diseases expect stigmatization in their work place. As a result, they feel highly uncomfortable when at work. Even if their colleagues are friendly and empathetic, they are afraid of making the smallest mistake. It can be said that they have a prominent complex about their handicap.

There is a distinct lack of understanding about mental health issues, which fuels stigma and causes some employers to shy away from hiring people with mental illness. (Lucas, Clay)

In some countries like, for example, China people with mental disorders cannot marry. (Kristof) This restriction is not widespread in the world. Still there are not so many married couples in which one of the partners or both of them are mentally disordered. It mainly happens because of their incapability to build healthy relationships in general. (Scott, 836) However, it also happens because of the fear and shame a retarded person feels due to his illness. Probably these people need support from specialized organizations. Trainings can make positive changes in their mindsets.

Modern media tries to aim for an improvement of the social attitude towards people with mental retardation. The media in the United States for example has fought for years with these stereotypes whenever possible. The most powerful and popular tool of mass media is television. The topic of mental illnesses is widely discussed in documentaries, TV shows and showed in positive way in motion pictures. Nevertheless, imaginative literature has had its prominent influence as well. It is a part of social response and does not only describe the situation to those who are not informed well enough, but also appeals to finer feelings.

### **1.3 Literary Background**

There is a number of scientific literature about the social position of mentally disordered people. This literature is meant for professional scientists, the medical community and people involved in special education. These professionals are already prepared to communicate with mentally handicapped people through their education and have experience in this kind of work. However, mentally retarded people come in contact with non-professional people as well. Those cannot be sure, if their attitude to disordered person is correct and this might make them feel uncomfortable or disdainful of the experience. That is why literature and other types of art can be helpful in preparing us for situations that we have never experienced before.

Imaginative literature is closer to people, it brings the message up in a more illustrative way. There are not many works in imaginative literature about the problem. Although we cannot talk about an independent literary genre, this theme can be found in many literary works, that have gained in popularity: *Diary of a Madman* (1835) by Nikolai Gogol, *The Idiot* (1868 – 1869) by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) by William Faulkner, *Of Mice and Men* (1937) by John Steinbeck, *The Royal Game* (1942) by Stefan Zweig, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) by Ken Kesey, *Sybil* (1973) by Flora Rheta Schreiber, *Forrest Gump* (1986) by Winston Groom, *Human Traces* (2005) by Sebastian Faulks.

The main characters of all books mentioned above suffer from different types and degrees of mental disorder. As a result they need to face social situations they would not have faced if their intelligence was on par with a normal person. They are brought into being by their authors for to some extent different purposes, such as:

- to show the situation from the point of view of the person with a naive vision of life,

- to describe the position and destiny of mentally retarded person,

- to pose the question of who is more healthy in reality, a handicapped person or modern society, etc.

Let us look more closely at these novels from two points of view: the form of narration and purpose of using mental disorder in the plot. *The Idiot* (1868 – 1869), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), *The Royal Game* (1942), *Sybil* (1973) and *Human Traces* (2005) are written in the form of third person narration. In *The Idiot* mental retardation is described in its mild form. His behavior is characterized by naivety and absolute honesty. These qualities make him incomprehensible to people around him. Dostoevsky tried to show that society is so apathetic that kindness is viewed as the very same deviation as mental disease. *The Royal Game* shows insanity as payment for geniality. *Sybil* and *Human Traces* deal with scientific facts, but they do not bring up the social impact connected to the disability. They reveal to an ordinary reader certain facts about mental disorders and their treatment in different periods of time. In *Sybil* it is the era known as the 70s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Schreiber) and in *Human Traces* - the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. (Sebastian Faulks)

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) belongs to another type of books with the same topic. It presents the form of first person narration. However, the narrator, Bromden, has no real mental disorder. He pretends that he is mentally ill as he has no choice. His pretended insanity as well as insanity of others in the ward makes the patients alien to the people who are considered to be normal in the outside world. The author's purpose is to show that the system tries to get rid of people who are in some way different from the rest of society.

*Diary of a Madman* (1835), *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *Forrest Gump* (1986) are examples of novels in which the reader has an opportunity to look at the world through the prism of naivety and open-mindedness. All three novels are examples of the first person narration. All the narrators are persons with different types of mental disorder. It allows their authors to analyze the ways of thinking of retarded persons. This type of novel is closer to the work of Keyes.

## II. Practical Part

### 2.1 History of the creation of the novel

There were many aspects and situations that influenced Daniel Keyes and inspired him to write his short story, “Flowers for Algernon”. It is no doubt, that he was familiar with specialized literature dealing with mental deviations and the social response to this problem. It was mostly his own personal experience that inspired Keyes with the idea of his future book. Yet it took him another fourteen years before this idea took its final shape.

In 1945 he had a conflict with his family as his career plans did not live up to his parents’ expectations. He began to think about the possibility to increase a person’s IQ by medical intervention. (Keyes, 1999). Of course, the concept was fantastic in its core. However, Daniel Keyes was mostly interested in the philosophical and ethical sides of an operation of this kind.

A bit later, during his college life, Keyes performed a dissection on a white mouse. This experience crafted the image of Algernon, the mouse for experiments in his book. Not only this episode but the entire education Keyes received at the university contributed to his future masterpiece, as his specialization was psychoanalysis. He was always interested in the human mind and its possible deviations.

Twelve years later, when Keyes taught English at the school for mentally disordered children, one of his highly motivated students, asked Keyes if he could be “normal” one day and attend regular class on the condition that he would try really hard to be smart. (Keyes, 1999) This simple question shocked Keyes and, as a result, the main character of *Flowers for Algernon*, Charley Gordon, was born.

In 1959 the short story “Flowers for Algernon” was published. Keyes won recognition from the public and received the Hugo Award. Even after it, Keyes was still thinking about the main character’s fate and decided to rework his short story into the eponymous novel, which was published in 1966. It was warmly greeted by readers and received the Nebula Award.

### 2.2 Plot

*Flowers for Algernon* is the most famous work by Daniel Keyes. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that its fame is widespread and the story is well known to the whole world. However, to understand all the aspects which the author uses to show the inner

world of the main character and the social situations he encounters, it is good to be familiar with the basic plot of the book. The plotline is shortly described below. A special focus is on the elements which distinguish Keyes' novel and short story from other works with related themes.

The main character, Charlie Gordon, has an IQ of 68. He works as a cleaner in a bakery and attends a night school for mentally retarded adults and tries his best to learn how to read and write. His teacher, a young woman, thinks that he is highly motivated and recommends him to the survey institute for an experiment. Two scientists from that institute are working to increase the intellect of a white mouse, Algernon. Although the author uses the fantastic element of the experiment, to give momentum to the story, he does not lay an emphasis on it. In the first instance Keyes deals with the substantial problems of the real world. At the same time, without it the whole plot of the book would not have been possible. At first, the main character even envies the mouse because it is smarter than him and so decides to go through with the experiment. After the operation Charlie's intellect starts to grow rapidly. Step by step, he remembers his childhood and adolescence. He was stigmatized by his mother, sister and by his classmates. His mother beat him for not being "normal". His sister used this situation and blamed Charlie for her own mistakes in front of their parents. His classmates used his naivety to use him as the "fall guy". He also understands that his colleagues at work were laughing at him and used him as he did not understand what was happening.

His intellect grows and Charlie learns not only how to read, he learns many foreign languages; he reads scientific articles in Hindi, Japanese, Chinese and Russian. He studies other disciplines as well: physics, biology, chemistry, history. He finds himself in love with his former teacher and tries to start a relationship with her. He is not very successful though, as she thinks that he has become arrogant. She is partly right, as Charlie's character develops together with his intellect. He reaches his peak – IQ 200, so he becomes significantly cleverer than his "creators" who maintained the operation. It is another aspect which differs *Flowers for Algernon* from other works on the theme of mental retardation. Keyes explored the opposite side of mental retardation – an abnormally high IQ. The character is in conflict with society and, at the same time, he is in opposition with the emotional side of himself.

Approximately at the same moment that he reaches the highest peak of his IQ he discovers that regression is inevitable; with the course of time his IQ is going to become the same or even lower than it was before the operation. He leaves the institute and tries

to lead an independent life in a rented flat. He takes Algernon with him. At the same time, he continues in his research, looking for the way how to stop his regression. Not finding the answer, he contacts his family which left him long ago. He spends his last months before the regression completes with his former teacher, Alice. At the very end of the book he leaves the city, heading to the asylum and hopes that someone will put flowers on Algernon's grave. *Flowers for Algernon* is written in the form of the main character's reports to the institute. The usage of language, grammar and syntactic structures for the purposes of presenting the main idea also makes Keyes' work unique.

### **2.3 Composition of the novel**

In this part we try to discuss peculiarities of composition of the novel. Among them are: structure of the plot, form of narration and linearity of events. It will be analyzed if these aspects help to evoke a response from the reader.

*Flowers for Algernon*, both as a short story and a novel belong to the epistolary genre. It is written in the form of a diary. In Charlie's Gordon case, this diary consists of reports he wrote during his cooperation with the medical institute. His first report is dated the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March and the last note is dated the 21<sup>st</sup> of November.

This period and the whole plot of the book can be divided up into three parts. The first one is the period when Charlie is getting smarter. The second one is his intellectual peak, when his IQ is 200 and he tries to find practical use for his geniality. The third one is the period of decadence, when his intellect gets weaker.

All three periods are connected with seasons of the year. As it was already mentioned above, that main character's diary begins on 3<sup>rd</sup> of March. The operation takes place on 6<sup>th</sup> of March. Thereafter, Charlie's intellectual and emotional station improves. His intelligence awakes in parallel with the awakening of the nature. His development reaches its peak in June and he spends the summer working actively and collecting new experience. At the end of August, he understands that his intelligence will inevitably decrease. At the end of September this process begins, and so the decadence is connected with autumn. Charlie's intelligence dies away alongside with the nature around him.

The narration is chronological, with flashbacks from the main character's childhood and adolescence. As the novel has the form of reports written by the main character, a first person narration is used. Nevertheless, in flashbacks the author uses the third

person narration. It is easier for Charlie to describe events of his early life in this form, as when he remembers them, he sees everything as if from the outside.

The two different forms of narration are used for different purposes. First person narration is more intimate and emotional. It is easier for the reader to understand the character and feel sympathy for him. In the meantime, third person narration is also used very appropriately in the novel. In this form the cruelest scenes of stigmatization are described. This method makes described situations more realistic, because usually it is the way how an average person sees cruelty in the real world. Also, that disgusting and ruthless deeds are described in a matter of fact ways has its emotional impact.

The composition described above contributes to the artistic merit of the short story and the novel. Charlie does not know another kind of life and has no chance to get to know it. His intellect is something given, he cannot improve his situation. But along with this he is happy. Later, already being smart, he understands how miserable his life was. He experiences the difference. The third part – degradation – is the shortest one, but at the same time – the most impressive one. It shows perfectly the desperation of a man who saw light, but will be plunged in darkness, inescapably. This pattern would not be so vivid and impressive if Keyes did not describe the prosperity of Charlie's intellect before it. He tries to show how passionately human beings strain after light. It is something inherent for every person, regardless of his status, physical condition and IQ. From this we can draw the conclusion that the structure of the book is created in a way to emphasize the long path that Charlie travel's.

## **2.4 Cast of characters**

The cast of characters is arranged in such a manner that Charlie Gordon has a chance to encounter with his peers from every period of his life. The same is true about different social institutions such as: family, school, hospital and workplace.

The family is presented in a negative way. Charlie's mother is ashamed of him. His sister and farther are indifferent about his fate. The father even leaves the family and never tries to contact his son later, even though he knows that Charlie is treated badly at home.

Now he had the clear picture of Charlie's mother, screaming at him, holding a leather belt in her hand, and his father trying to hold her back. [...] "Look at him!" Rose screams. "He can't learn to read and

write, but he knows enough to look at a girl that way. I'll beat that filth out of his mind." (Keyes, 78)

Schoolmates are also described as an unfriendly group of people. They use Charlie as an object of derision. They develop their identity as well as show off in front of friends. A similar attitude can be observed among the main character's colleagues. Usually they use his naivety and make fun of him. They think of it as of harmless amusement.

A long time ago once I asked Joe Carp how he lerned to read and if I coud lern to read to. He luffed like he always done when I say something funny and he says to me Charlie why waste your time they cant put any branes in where there aint none. (Keyes 19)

Apparently, scientists from the institute and Charlie's teacher Alice represent another type of people and another social institution – specialized school. They are used to work with mentally disordered people. Consequently, they are more tactful, understanding and willing to help. Scientists, Dr Strauss and professor Nemur's attitude is knowing and professional. Alice Kinnian's attitude is professional as well, but she is more emotional than her colleagues.

It is quite obvious that the behavior of people who were prepared for work with mentally disordered people by their education and experience is adequate. Unfortunately, in different layers of society treatment of disordered people is not always so positive. In the 50s and 60s this problem was more acute than it is now. Even today it is difficult to monitor the whole situation in the world, as mentally disordered people meet dozens of people every day. The majority of them is not trained or ready for communication with people with special needs. In addition, unfortunately, not everyone has an inborn tact and kindness in him. Probably, it is not ultimately realistic that all Charlie's experiences were negative. Nevertheless, this exaggeration in the plot is necessary to draw attention to the problem. The stronger the negative emotion a reader feels while reading the story, the bigger the book's overall impact on him. We can presume that in such a way the author is trying to get the maximal response. Keyes is highly interested in the problem of mentally retarded people and he tries to share his interest with as many people as possible. The method he uses for it is not new but effective. His descriptions are particularly cruel and cold-hearted. The first reaction of a reader is the thought that he would never do something so cruel with a mentally disordered person. It is logical to presume that in a real situation similar to the one in the novel this reader will be more conscious after reading the book than he was before.

## 2.5 Linguistic devices

Though Keyes is not the first one who tells his story from the point of view of a mentally disordered person, his approach is unique. As it has already been mentioned in the theoretical part, the same method was used for instance by Nikolai Gogol, William Faulkner or Winston Groom. The latter intentionally simplifies the narration, but not to a great degree. Faulkner's narration is more dissonant and based on impressions. On the other hand Keyes tries to imitate not only a mentally disordered person's way of thinking, but the means by which he expresses his ideas as well. The author uses a variety of linguistic devices to make Charlie's writing look more authentic. The first extract is taken from the first report of the main character. At this point in time Charlie's IQ is 68.

Progris riport 1 martch 3

Dr Strauss says I shoud rite down what I think and remembir and evrey thing that happins to me from now on. I dont no why but he says its importint so they will see if they can use me. I hope they use me becaus Miss Kinnian says mabye they can make me smart. I want to be smart. <...> I am 32 yeres old and next munth is my brithday. I tolld dr Strauss and perfesser Nemur I cant rite good but he says it dont matter he says I shud rite just like I talk and like I rite compushishens in Miss Kinnians class at the beekmin collidge center for retarded adults where I go to lern 3 times a week on my time off.  
(Keyes, 1)

It can be seen clearly that Charlie has difficulties with spelling. His orthography is phonemic, which means that the graphemes correspond to the phonemes of the language. (Port) For example, in the words "shoud" and "rite" the silent consonants are missing. In the first instance it is silent /l/, in the second one it is silent /w/. In the word "becaus" silent vowel /e/ is missing. There are not many morphological errors in the extract, as this type of error implies wrong structure of the word. Among them can be mentioned "tolld", as the past tense is formed with a mistake.

In general, it can be said that at that point Charlie is in command only of the Present Simple tense. He uses it a bit awkwardly but almost without gross mistakes, except for the phrase "it dont matter". Another example shows such syntactic mistake as double negation: "I told them I dont want to race with Algernon no more." (Keyes, 16) The

second extract is taken from the 7<sup>th</sup> report. It was written 18 days after Charlie's operation.

I didnt know I was thinking and remembering. Maybe that means something is happining to me. I dont feel different but Im so exited I cant sleep. (Keyes, 23)

He still has difficulties with spelling. The punctuation is lacking and the sentences are still short. Nevertheless, he begins to use other tenses, such as the present and the past continuous which was not customary for him before the operation. The next extract is taken from the 9<sup>th</sup> report, when Charlie is not a genius yet, but his IQ is close to the IQ of an average person of his age.

Prof. Nemur gave me some more tapes to play while I sleep. I still don't know how the conscious and unconscious mind works, but Dr. Strauss says not to worry yet. (Keyes, 34)

There are no more spelling mistakes. Sentences are longer, the second one in the extract above is a compound sentence. Also, Charlie begins to use punctuation in a proper way. Soon after Charlie's IQ reaches its peak. In June he writes in his 11<sup>th</sup> report the following extract:

The same thing happened when I tried to discuss Chaucer with an American literature specialist, questioned an Orientalist about the Trobriand Islanders, and tried to focus on the problems of automation-caused unemployment with a social psychologist who specialized in public opinion polls on adolescent behavior. (Keyes, 69)

He uses not only longer sentences, but longer words as well to express his thoughts. There are simple, compound and complex sentences in his reports. No more morphological or syntactic mistakes can be found in the extract. Also, there are no spelling errors in his text. Charlie even begins to use slang and argotic expressions. "God damn him. He didn't know what he was talking about." Keyes, (113) In general, it should be mentioned that Charlie's reports of this period are full of vivid descriptions and dialogues. It is logical that along with the decreasing of Charlie's IQ his style of writing becomes primitive again.

## **2.6 Possible meanings and interpretations of the novel**

Interpretation is an explanation of a literary work, based on the situations, character's deeds and the symbols described in it. Every element mentioned above can be understood in several possible ways. This understanding depends on age, social status and the experience of the reader. According to this, it can be assumed that there are as many interpretations as is the number of people who have read the book. Consequently, they are innumerable. Nevertheless, we can assume that some meanings are more palpable and prominent than the other. Therefore in Keyes' work *Flowers for Algernon* six possible interpretations will be discussed in the following paragraphs. They are chosen according to their significance and their connection with the theme of this thesis. Among them there are major and minor ones. Both types of themes express the author's opinion on the subject on which he has written his short story and novel. Major themes are themes the author returns to more often, they are the most important ideas in the story. Minor themes are presented by the ideas that appear only periodically.

Major interpretations are:

- Man's attempt to come near God;
- Biblical theme: Adam, Eve and the Tree of Knowledge;
- Conflict between intellect and emotions.

Minor ones are:

- Role of life and friendship in person's life;
- Identity of a person;
- How the past influences the present.

### **2.6.1 Major interpretations**

#### **Man's attempt to come near God**

This theme is not new in literature. It has exited people's imagination since the legend of the tower of Babel was told. However, in the modern world this theme has received a completely new meaning. Indeed, today humanity is much closer to the powers prescribed to God than it was ten centuries ago. In the first place, it concerns the fields of medicine and technologies. Owing to medicine, life expectancy has almost doubled and many diseases previously untreatable are a thing of the past. As

consequence of technical development men can fly, enjoy television, the Internet etc. In that context, it is easy to forget that we are not omnipotent. Dr Strauss and professor Nemur in *Flowers for Algernon* forget about it, going forward with the operation on Charlie. Professor Nemur claims:

We who have worked on this project at Beekman University have the satisfaction of knowing we have taken one of nature's mistakes and by our new techniques created a superior human being. (Keyes, 112)

Other characters are not so optimistic about the intervention. They think that once Charlie was born with mental retardation, nothing should be changed, as he was made this way by nature. Before the operation Charlie's nurse tells him that an operation is a deed against God (Keyes, 12). Rose, Charlie's mother agrees with this opinion. She makes him pray again and again in the hope it can make him smart.

At the end of the novel, regression of Charlie's intellect shows how useless a man's attempt to come near to God or Nature is. It is no matter how clever we are or how much knowledge we have gained, there are still many more mysteries that we cannot resolve in the world around us. It is up to a reader, to decide if this is good or bad. On the one hand, Charlie is grateful for the opportunity he received, as he was able to see the world in a different light and remember his past. On the other hand, after the regression, his intellect probably is going to become even lower than it was before the operation. In such a manner the reader can see several results of one deed with its advantages and disadvantages. It corresponds with real life, as every event in life has its positive and negative sides. All these results are presented within the natural course of life which cannot be changed. The main idea of this interpretation is as follows: there are things given and it is necessary to accept them with humility.

### **Biblical theme: Adam, Eve and the Tree of Knowledge**

This theme is not related closely to the previous one, even though it also discusses the concept of God. While, in the first interpretation God can be understood as Nature or the Universe. In this one, the theme is strictly biblical. It was already mentioned that Charlie's regression takes place in autumn. One of the synonyms for the word "autumn" is "fall". (It is an example of polysemy as this word can be understood also in the meaning of "drop" or "decrease"). It reminds the reader of the biblical theme and the fall of the first humans – Adam and Eve. They were naive and pure before they ate the

forbidden fruit. After eating it, they came to know what is good and what is evil. As a result they are punished with their expulsion from Eden. (Genesis 3: 6-24) A similar thing happens to Charlie. After the operation he gains knowledge of the world around him. He loses his innocence literally and figuratively. Just like Adam and Eve, he is punished. His punishment is not only the regression of his intellect, but even before it – his own arrogance and coldness. His intelligence is the cause why he loses his friends, job he loved and a pure, positive perception of the world.

This theme has almost nothing to do with the theme of mental retardation, but with the core of human being. It reflects the human urge to learn as much as possible, even when it is unnecessary. The allegory with the biblical plot shows that this urge can have negative impact on humanity and society.

### **The conflict between intellect and emotions**

As Charlie's IQ is initially low he is ruled mainly by his emotions. However after the operation he begins to analyze the world around him. This fact produces his inner conflict. He was accustomed to listening to his heart, soon after the operation he begins to listen to reason. He even analyzes his feelings for his teacher, Alice. Before the operation, he saw only positive qualities of her: her intelligence, her warmth and empathy. Later, he starts to notice her imperfections. He thinks that she is not smart enough for him and sometimes too hysterical. Inevitably, he is scared of the presumption that his intelligence may eliminate his love for Alice. This situation repeats with Charlie's old friends and even with his "creators", Dr Strauss and professor Nemur. It makes Charlie irritated and he tries desperately to find a balance between his intellect and emotions. His doubts and aggression are most likely literary exaggerations. However, this exaggeration is needed to make Charlie's character more prominent. On the other hand we cannot know exactly the behavior of a person whose IQ was increased dramatically, as this situation is a fantastic one.

Charlie is not the only character, who needs this kind balance. Keyes pushes this exaggeration to the limits through the example of two characters: professor Nemur and Fay. The professor is ruled only by his intellect. He is smart, but at the same time he is severe, cold, boring and has no sense of humor. People around him do not like him too much, he has no friends. Fay, Charlie's neighbor, on the contrary is carefree, passionate and illogical. Due to this she has no idea what she wants for her life or from people

around her. Both professor Nemur and Fay are unhappy. This shows how important the balance between intellect and emotions is in the life of every person, not only that of Charlie Gordon.

## **2.6.2 Minor interpretations**

### **Role of life and friendship in person's life**

It should be said that from the very beginning of the novel it is obvious that Charlie longs for love and understanding. In his first reports he admits that he wants to be liked by his colleagues. Later on, when he remembers his past, he describes how desperately he wanted to please his parents and sister. For Alice Kinnian, Charlie feels a special kind of attraction. He understands that she knows both sides of him: the genius and the mentally retarded person. He thinks that with her he can finally achieve fulfillment. It is quite interesting that the only truly absolute and unconditional friendship Charlie finds is with Algernon. The mouse had the same kind of operation, so the main character feels that they are connected. Charlie preserves this friendly affection even after his regression. His last appeal is: "P.S. please if you get a chance put some flowers on Algernon's grave in the back yard." (Keyes, 216)

In such a manner, Charlie wants all the types of love that are sought by every average person: parental one, love of friends and love of a life-partner. It is most likely that Keyes wanted to stress that mentally retarded people have the same emotional needs as people with normal IQ. Charlie needs love, he is tired of loneliness. The same emotions are familiar for every person. It is not difficult to understand that everyone at least once in his life was lonely and craved for compassion. This understanding helps the readers to sympathize with the main character as they can find something that they can relate to. Sympathy teaches a reader a lesson. This is another example why the novel could be called educational.

### **Identity of a person**

At the very beginning of the novel Charlie does not know for sure who he is. In his case this happens partly because his mental retardation causes problems with memory. Nonetheless, even after the operation it takes him time before he finds personal fulfillment. In due course, he understands what is the range of his interests and which people he likes and which he does not like. Still, to understand it he gets through a

period of depression and doubts. It is Keyes' way to stress that the development of the personality is impossible without suffering.

This interpretation is quite significant to many people. Everyone is familiar with the problem of self-identification. In the modern world there are so many opportunities that many people get lost. This uncertainty draws Charlie closer to the reader, as it is another problem that he has in common with average members of society. Especially it is important for teenagers and young people. It is not a secret that at this age they feel that they are misunderstood and unappreciated. Charlie's experience may be a good example for them, how to cope with their inner problems.

### **How the past influences the present**

Even though Charlie cannot remember his past he deals with the effects of it. For example, he is afraid of his sexuality because he was punished severely by his mother for it. She taught him to be ashamed of sexual excitement. As a result he could not perform sexual intercourse with Alice for a long time. Another example is his love for looking out the window. This is a habit he acquired in childhood when was not allowed to participate in games of his peers and in the life of his hometown in general.

Charlie cannot cope with his present until he remembers his past and goes through this painful experience one more time. In psychology there is an opinion that all the problems a person encounters in his adult life are just consequences of his childhood experience. This opinion is not ultimate, but Keyes chooses it for the concept of his novel. At the same time we are created by our past, so the author does not propose to escape from it. On the contrary, he proposes to accept this past, no matter how rugged it was. Charlie becomes a mature individual only after remembering his past. He accepts it and forgives his family, classmates and himself. As a result at the end of the novel he has no regrets. Even after losing his memory again he retains a positive feeling about his past, instead of the pain that he felt before. We can say that Keyes strategy about past problems is to accept them and move on.

## **2.7 Reader's response**

It has already mentioned that both short story and novel *Flowers for Algernon* got prestigious awards. Daniel Keyes is the only writer who got Hugo and Nebula awards for two works with the same title. Still the success of Keyes's work goes beyond a critics' acknowledgment. *Flowers for Algernon* is still popular even fifty four years after

it was written. (Ickes-Dunbar) It has been included into school curricula, to be discussed during lessons. It is believed that *Flowers for Algernon* can be called an educational novel. Indeed, the short story and the novel can teach the reader humaneness and empathy in an interesting and entertaining way. According to Ickes-Dunbar, it has great influence on the mindset of teenagers.

In this period adolescents are usually in conflict with the society, their families and even with themselves. Their bodies, intellect and emotions are changing. Reading about the same changes in Charlie, they can associate with him naturally. They can understand that their problems are solvable and, at the same time, learn how to be kinder.

Nevertheless, there were attempts to ban the book in school libraries, mainly in the USA. Parents objected against analyzing the novel at lessons. They explained their objections by the presence of sexual themes in the work. (ALA 2004) It is true that Charlie thinks a lot about his sexuality and his attraction to Alice. However, there are no explicit descriptions of sexual intercourse in the novel, so it was not banned in majority of schools where these objections were made. Academic community presumes that the novel has a positive influence on students.

The popularity of the novel can be partly measured by the quantity of adaptations. The novel has been filmed four times (1961, 1968, 2000, 2006). The plays based upon the book were created in USA (1969), France (1982), Australia (1984), Poland (1985), Japan (1987, 1997). Radio monodramas were broadcasted in Ireland (1983) and in Czechoslovakia (1988-1991). From 1978 to 1980 the dramatic musical "Charlie and Algernon" was successfully performed in different cities in America and Great Britain.

Even today Daniel Keyes thanks his readers for their letters; that they send him about his most popular novel, *Flowers for Algernon*. The author is satisfied by this fact, especially because he had problems with publishing it for the first time back in the 50s. Editors tried to persuade him to change the ending of the story. They wanted Charlie to keep his high IQ, marry Alice and live happily. Keyes denied this proposal. He remembers:

"It (the manuscript) was rejected by five publishers over the period of a year. I was suffering, because I wanted the book published! But finally it appeared, and *Flowers for Algernon* has never gone out of print since..." (Keyes)

It is difficult to say if literary value of *Flowers for Algernon* would have changed if the ending had been different. However, it may be sensible to believe that the author of the story was able to choose the better option for his work. Both the short story and the novel have a good balance. The popularity of Keyes' work proves that the form of the story, its composition and ending manage to make an impact on the average reader.

### III. Conclusion

The dimensions of the novel, which were discussed in the main body, are the composition, the cast of characters, linguistic devices, possible interpretations and the reader's response. They were discussed in connection with the theme of this thesis, i.e. a reflection of the social position of mentally disordered persons in works of literature. The composition gives the main character a possibility to have high IQ for some time. Owing to it, a reader gets the opportunity to understand the emotions of a person who wants to be normal, but cannot achieve it. The cast of characters is constructed in such a manner that every reader can associate himself with a certain group of characters. He can ask himself what he would do in a similar situation, when meeting with a retarded person. Linguistic devices are used to describe the way of thinking of a retarded person. This pattern can be called effective as it is an unusual experience for the reader to get acquainted with the inner thoughts of the person with a different IQ. The possible interpretations include topics, directly associated with the problem of this thesis, and the minor side topics that expand on the subject. Reader's responses were if not always positive, still wide, as the novel is popular among readers, it was filmed 4 times and is discussed at schools and universities as a masterpiece of literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Conclusions were drawn from the dimensions mentioned above. They were worked out by analyzing individual parts of the short story and the novel. The analysis was provided by means of example situations from the plot and quotations from the text of the novel. It is based upon literary theory, the biography of the author, reviews of the novel and the short story and other secondary literature on the related topic. It can be said that three main questions of this thesis are answered.

The devices used by the author to draw attention to the problem were described. These devices may be used in different areas of our life. They can be used in scientific articles concerning the topic and in articles evaluating its cultural impact as well. Another example is the use of linguistic devices (literal way of expressing person's thoughts) in social advertising. The comparison of a mentally disordered person with a genius can be used in articles or in public speeches.

It is difficult to estimate for sure if the works correspond with reality. At the same time, it can be said that the descriptions and the concept are highly believable, which

was verified by the reaction of reviewers and readers. The situation and events reflect the problem of the position given to mentally retarded person within our society.

The popularity of the novel was described in the main body. It is not only popular, but controversial as well. These facts show that *Flowers for Algernon* is capable of drawing a reader's response. Part of the reader's response is the reader's interpretation. The greater the amount of possible interpretations, the better the opportunity for readers to think and learn from a novel. Apparently, Keyes' work presents enough of possible meanings. This implies a room for understanding of many important topics, one of which is the social position of mentally disordered persons.

At the end of the thesis I would like to say that *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes deserves close attention. It differs from works of the similar kind by using fantastic elements. At the same time it addresses the psychological needs and social situations, which correspond with real life. Based on this to this it can be said that *Flowers for Algernon* presents at least some features of interest for all types of readers and for literary research as well.

It should be added that *Flowers for Algernon* deals with certain types of society, namely societies of the developed world like America, Canada, or Europe. The situation in the Asian or African countries probably is completely different due to cultural and historical differences. It is no doubt that these differences may be a challenging theme for further research. Also further research on the topic can include the question if this kind of literature should be the part of school curricula. It can educate people in a narrow, but important area. At the same time there is another question: if the topic is not too narrow to be discussed in unspecialized institutions. To understand it better, other minor topics within the book that are not connected with mental disorders should be discussed. The outcome may be that it may not be this one specific book, that is added to school curricula but other books that deal with a similar topic, some examples of which were in the theoretical part.

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