

Original Paper

A Journey to Healing Pain: Trauma Writing of Charlie Gordon in *Flowers for Algernon*

Yi Shi¹

¹ School of English Studies, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, China

Received: September 7, 2024 Accepted: September 25, 2024 Online Published: October 22, 2024

doi:10.22158/elsr.v5n4p76

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/elsr.v5n4p76>

Abstract

Flowers for Algernon, first published in 1959, is a novel written by the American writer Daniel Keyes. It tells the story of Charlie Gordon's journey from having an intellectual disability to gaining extraordinary intelligence, as well as his regression when one experimental procedure starts to go wrong. "Trauma" is a marked theme in the work, which plays a vital role in portraying characters and developing plots. In the light of trauma theory, this essay puts a focus on the relationship between trauma and the individual, and author of this paper argues that family and society are two major roots in imposing misery upon the protagonist. With the interference of technology, trauma is rediscovered and represented by his confusion, maladjustment, and rage. Ultimately, he treats it through finding himself, building connections with others, and doing contributions to the society. It is concluded that based on writing the trauma of the intelligently disabled, Keyes vividly communicates his concerns on then further revealing the theme of science and technology, goodness, and wisdom.

Keywords

Flowers for Algernon, trauma, recovery

1. Introduction

Daniel Keyes was an American writer who was honored for his *Flowers for Algernon* with a Hugo Award in 1960 and Nebula Award in 1966, two most prestigious awards given for American science fiction. Also, the novel gains fame when its 1968 film version, *Charly*, earned Cliff Robertson an Academy Award as Best Actor for his portrayal of Charlie Gordon. This book, praised for its story arc, presents a series of progress reports written by the protagonist Charlie Gordon, a 32-year-old man who is intelligently disabled but later undergoes a surgical procedure that will dramatically increase his mental capabilities. Unfortunately, effects of the operation wear off in the end and Charlie is once more of subnormal intelligence. This procedure is predictable from a laboratory mouse, Algernon. In the progress

reports, Charlie documents everything that happens to him, enabling the reader to read about the changes from his viewpoint. Focusing on the use of science and technology, choice of intelligence or morality, as well as love and sexuality, the novel succeeds in exposing various modern dilemmas.

2. Literature Review

Since its publication, *Flowers for Algernon* has caught the local literary circle's concern and criticism. Generally, the current studies on such a remarkable novel mainly focus on its thematic concerns, character analysis and narrative structure. In light of the theme, scholars majorly revolve around emotional intelligence development, antihero, human right and so on. Sklar holds that "the unified voice of the character (Charlie Gordon) is reduced to a less authentic multiplicity" by "following the constraints of dystopian SF (scientific fiction) to their logical conclusion" (p. 59). Concerning the thematic concern, Blackford underscores the child consciousness of this novel, reviewing that "the child is a synecdoche for environmental conditioning and a symptom of broader social problems in the environment" (p. 286). Also, as to the narrative structure, Palumbo argues that this story recapitulates the "Parable of the Cave" as the "variation on the monomyth" (p. 444).

In China, researches on this book are still limited. Scholars mainly highlight translation analysis and cross-media communication. As for the translation analysis, Luo Xiyu and Yang Jinyu criticize that the Chinese version of this work loses the balance if there are complex and lengthy sentences with a plethora of technical terms in English texts from the perspective of Skopos Theory (pp. 150-151). Ju Hong speaks highly of its adaptability into the musical for the melodious songs, outstanding performance, exquisite stage design, and touching script (pp. 97-99). Generally, there is still space on this work for further research domestically.

The study of Keyes' works still goes on, but few pay attention to the trauma writing of the character, which is a marked issue throughout the progress reports from the book. Over recent decades, as the theory of trauma has evolved, trauma in literature are being highlighted, which offers a new perspective for the study of Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon*.

Freud's theories on traumatic experience and memory define the psychological concepts that guide the field. He sees trauma as "an experience which within a short period of time presents the mind with an increase of stimulus too powerful to be dealt with or worked off in the normal way" (p. 275). Herman Judith puts that "unlike commonplace misfortunes," "traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death" (p. 33). Based on their definitions of trauma, it can be concluded that trauma is an overwhelming experience or event that threatens an individual's physical or mental integrity on the long term. Accordingly, this novel, as the primary object, will be analyzed based on the theory of trauma with an aim to explore the sources, representations, and treatments of protagonist's trauma.

3. Trauma Sources of Charlie Gordon

3.1 Trauma Posed by the Family: Domination and Indifference

Bowen emphasizes that a family has two principal functions, helping differentiation of self and providing individuals with a stable sense of security and belonging (pp. 2-90). However, Charlie's family is unable to relieve his plight but worsen it instead with the result of internalizing his shame.

His mother Rose's harshness on Charlie is the most noted source of his trauma, including her rude words and corporal punishment. She puts unreasonable expectations on Gordon, and when he fails her, she will criticize and even abuse him for his behaviors. For example, if Gordon pees in his pants rather than go to the bathroom in time, he will receive his mother's slaps, which add up to his contempt for himself. Worse still, Gordon's mother gives him up partly because she feels humiliated. Despite numerous efforts to treat and teach him, they barely pay off. His mother refuses to accept the result, forcing him at home instead of going to school or being outdoors. Actually, his mother's shame on Charlie is a lack of confidence in herself as she asks herself whether she is responsible for the situation of Charlie.

If Rose is dominant and arbitrary, Charlie's father Matt's cowardliness also accounts for their son's trauma. In modern foreign literature, "the image of a father has lost its positive significance and turned negative, failing to shoulder the responsibility of a father towards his children and society" (Zhang, p. 96). In Charlie's household, his mother tends to play a tougher role while the father has less discursive power. Matt does not take a harder stance when he should have stepped forward. The absence of his father is problematic when he fails to stop his wife from punishing their son and contributes little to relieving him. One of few things he can do is cut Charlie's hair in the basement. In some way, it is his weakness that forces his wife's stubbornness. Rose's domination and Matt's indifference finally isolates their son.

The broken marriage strengthens the unsafe sense of the poor child as well, which is demonstrated by the daily quarrel and the ultimate decision to send him to the nursing house. For one thing, their son is constantly what they are fighting for. Matt blames Rose for her self-delusion of pretending that Charlie is all right. While Rose is dissatisfied with Matt's taking no measures under such circumstance. For another, they argue about Matt's career choice. Matt prefers to open his own barber store while his wife regards it as a despicable job which disagrees with her tendency to keep up with the Joneses. More severely, their unstable relationship fosters their daughter Norma to despise Charlie, too. To be exact, she, like her mother, thinks he humiliates her in front of her classmates. For instance, Norma tells her friend that Charlie is adopted. In addition, she runs into a wall accidentally but blames Charlie for killing her on purpose, which causes Rose's beating with a strap. It is clear that parents do not play their roles well in educating the normal child to respect the intelligently disabled, so no one can escape the responsibility. Thus, all the family members bring about trauma to Charlie.

Admittedly, the negative impacts of family members go much further and longer than imagined. "Because parental love is so important, children will make up all kinds of excuses for a parent's behavior—even abusive behavior" (Engel, p. 22). So Charlie often ends up blaming himself for leading

his parent to abuse him. He internalizes such shame upon interpersonal communication. His parents can't offer parental care properly and deprives him of this otherwise. So, he will think he deserves no love. Accompanied by a sense of helplessness, Charlie falls into the gap between desire for love and practical incompatibility.

3.2 Social Exclusion: Embarrassment and Bullying

Charlie receives insufficient support from either family or society, who fail to make him either have an awareness of self or belief in others. People in the survivor's social world have the power to influence the eventual outcome of the trauma (Carlson et al., pp. 1311-1134). Herman points out that "a supportive response from other people may mitigate the impact, while a hostile or negative response may compound the damage and aggravate the traumatic syndrome" (p. 61). Unfortunately, as Charlie grows, he receives repulsion over and again. The hoax of Valentine card to Harriet is a case in point of others' bullying. Charlie initially asks his classmates to help him complete a love note. Whereas, the boys write obscene words in his name, which incurs Harriet's brothers' hitting. In addition, he is laughed at by the circled children calling "Charlie, fat head barley" (Keyes, p. 44) and he comes back to Uncle Herman's with dirt all over his clothes because of the nasty things thrown at his back by other boys. Furthermore, his colleagues in the bakery make fun of him often. They give him a wax apple to trick him into biting it and kick his legs while he is resting against the wall.

The conflict of trauma symptoms not only affects the inner world of Charlie, but also affects the close relationship with others. "Traumatic events have primary effects not only on the psychological structures of the self but also on the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community" (Herman, p. 51). Charlie is seized by the shame, guilt, and helplessness. He has difficulty establishing new relationships due to a lack of social intelligence, except colleagues in the bakery. Due to the detachment from society, Charlie considers life simple and routine. He gets up, deliver the goods, and get off from work day by day. Meanwhile, he has no idea of how people think of him, but he knows the only thing he seeks is to be smart which will make others accept him, his mother in particular.

Then, the fear of the traumatic event makes Charlie oscillate between isolation and attachment. The result is an ardent but unstable relationship, always fluctuating between the two extremes. In terms of love, he likes his teacher Alice Kinnian but he is never brave enough to confess. The trauma makes Charlie withdraw from any close relationship which can trace back to a severe punishment when Norma accuses him of peeking at her taking a bath. Such trauma leaves a profound influence on him. When he recognizes his affectations for Alice, he is unable to convey it properly and even labels it wrong. The childhood trauma disturbs him so much that the emotional barrier between him and his crush is hard to remove.

4. Representations of Charlie's Trauma

4.1 Confusion: Identity Crisis

The increasingly serious identity crisis is one traumatic impact on Charlie. The self-identity comes with self-awareness. With the dramatic development of his brain, it is crucial for Gordon to know himself in

order to figure out his problems. But the obstacle is by no means easy to overcome. When Charlie is fired from the bakery, he keeps loitering because he falls into a complete loss about where to go and what to do. Additionally, there exists two “Charlies” in one body where one is retarded and the other is smart. For example, each time Charlie attempts to further his relationship with Alice, he is frustrated by the contradicting ideas in his mind. The former discourages the latter because his behavior goes beyond the half self’s cognition. Briefly, it is hard for him to build bonds with the past to know himself.

As a result, to probe into Charlie’s subconscious plays an indispensable role in building a bridge to his miserable memories and identity perplexity. With the help of technology, his subconscious is waking up, which incurs recovery of his childhood memories. As Dr. Strauss puts it, the subconscious is a wall between the past and the present. Also, in this process, it is necessary for Charlie to carry out competition with Algernon, a lab rat, to maintain the growth of his intelligence and memorization. As long as he attains a sense of accomplishment from knowledge, it will compensate for his educational and cognitive blank in childhood. Gradually, he can work by a dough-mixer, finish reading *Robinson Crusoe*, and learn university courses on his own. Above all, Charlie comes to realize his bruised self-esteem upon recalling others’ bullying, which further contributes to his understanding of traumatic past.

4.2 *Maladjustment*

Among three major symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, “hyper-arousal” and “intrusion” stand out in Charlie’s maladjustment (Herman, p. 35). He becomes cleverer and cleverer but meanwhile he is increasingly disturbed by the trauma stress disorder.

Hyperarousal “reflects the persistent expectation of danger” (Herman, p. 35). This is typical of Charlie when he goes to Chicago, a completely new city for him. More specifically, the fear of death keeps bothering him before boarding. He cannot help but think of the potential plane crash. Likewise, an attendant reminds him to wear the safety belt but Charlie resists it. That’s because being tied resembles the childhood experience of being operated by doctors in the clinic where he is tied to the table. The noise of machine and the changing light terrify him so that he quivers and struggles. The helplessness of being restricted somewhere puts him in an imagined danger.

Intrusion “reflects the indelible imprint of the traumatic moment” (Herman, p. 35). Because of the underdeveloped intelligence, traumatic memories do not impact Charlie repeatedly until he has the operation. Afterwards, Charlie is frequently disturbed by the bitter bygones. “It was like a big hole opened up in the walls of my mind and I can just walk through” (Keyes, p. 43). It is cruel for a child to leave his family and do laborious work in a strange place. He recalls the first day he encounters Donner’s Bakery with the chestnut smell, only to see the scared look on his face. During the Christmas season, he longs to touch the fancy mechanical toys on the crowded street but he does not dare. The past pain is by no means easily removed from his memory.

4.3 *Anger and Losing Control*

Charlie is angry because he discovers the evil of human beings with his increased intelligence. In the first place, he finds Gino’s cheats by taking advantage of him to steal money. Then, he is conscious of his

mother's unbelievable selfishness and domination. Vanity and conceit are prevalent among people even when they are smart scientists since researchers connect intelligence with human dignity and value. But most significantly, he is able to discover the experiment's fatal flaw because they don't take his mental change as a variable into consideration. All they care about is their project progress. It scares him to understand that who master his destiny are not scientific giants but ordinary human beings.

Finally, he loses his control as the mix of doubt, anger, and hatred shoot up to the peak at the conference. First, the arrogance of so-called experts completely provokes him to anger. The professors at the conference in Chicago are intellectual bullies, celebrating their own intelligence and sophistication by laughing at their mental inferiors. Accordingly, they are no better than Charlie's coworkers at the bakery. Rage consumes him gradually as researchers think of him and Algernon as only "two prime exhibits for his presentation" (Keyes, p. 113), objectified as two samples in the laboratory. Charlie hates his being treated as a product of their technology. As a result, he loses control, determined to expose other's ignorance and proclaim that he is a human with history. Hence, the academic conference ends with the mess of unlocking the cage of Algernon.

5. Three Remedies for Trauma

5.1 Finding Himself

The problem of trauma memories is solved firstly by his waking up to know himself, which starts from the moment when he escapes from the experiment with Algernon. According to Herman, recovery is "based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections" (p. 133). So, Charlie needs to empowering himself by the "establishment of safety" (p. 155). Charlie alternates his residence after the disguised missing of Algernon, which demonstrates his determination not to be disturbed. He needs a shelter near the Times Square away from the chaos brought about by the research. Such selection shows his desire for safety and fulfillment of his wish since his childhood, going to New York.

Besides, living alone also creates an opportunity to think alone. Via writing the progress reports, Charlie is able to reconstruct his painful story. One vital part of recovery is "remembrance and mourning" (p. 155). During his solitary existence, he still keeps recording his changes in life, which is conducive to finding out who he is. "Reconstructing of the trauma story begins with a review of the patient's life before the trauma and the circumstances that led up to the event" (Herman, p. 176). It is critical for Charlie to figure out the reason why his family behaves like that. More importantly, at the sight of Rose, he recalls the night when she insists on taking Charlie to the Warren State Home, realizing that all of this is not his fault and never under his control. Above all, he knows himself as an individual regardless of his intelligence. Nevertheless, "because the truth is so difficult to face, survivors often vacillate in reconstructing their stories" (Herman, p. 181). On the newspaper publishing his escaping, Charlie is surprised to see the photo of his sister and mother. The conflicting emotions seize him again, which makes him not only anxious to be hugged by the family but also to get away from Rose's slapping meanwhile.

5.2 Building Connections with Others

The restoration of connections begins when Charlie realizes that he is not alone. One marked point is that when he leaves meeting hall, he takes Algernon with him as well. Algernon is the prime choice for him as they share a similar destiny. To rebuild the trauma memory is necessary, but he still has to face his family to settle his fear in the interpersonal relationship.

Charlie's respect for others and autonomy of himself is communicated during reunion with his family. Initially, Charlie's meeting with his father bears no result because he is afraid to dwarf Matt in this abrupt and absurd way. However, the situation changes when he sees his mother. Charlie shows his reason and subjectivity. Instead of hating Rose, Charlie tries to ponder over why she behaves like this. In Rose's mind, others' opinions always come first, beyond herself and family. To look decent matters most, including her dressing and her son's behaviors. When he arrives, the woman who is cleaning the windows in a cold and cloudy weather verifies his idea: appearance counts to her. Charlie is clear that she has no right to deny him again. This time he chooses to face Rose in an equal position.

It is also essential for Charlie to build a relationship with strangers in his new life. "As the trauma recedes into the past, it no longer represents a barrier to intimacy" (Herman, p. 203). This is demonstrated by his interactions with two women, Fay and Alice. His neighbor Fay Lillman is the first person for him to get to know in New York, who is a charming and uninhibited painter as the opposite of Charlie. She brings colors, thrills and adventures to his life. And Charlie's platonic relationship with Alice is another example. Charlie has passion for Alice who takes care of him and insists that she is the only woman he has ever loved. But they remain lovers' spiritual communication only because Alice recognizes that Charlie has childhood issues that he needs to settle before he can pursue a mature relationship with anyone. More importantly, seeing Fay and Alice interact with each other reminds Charlie that he's not the center of the universe. In this sense, Charlie is able to construct connections with others, from his family to his friends.

5.3 Contributing to Society

Ultimately, Charlie makes up his mind to do the research himself by his expertise. This is owing to a retarded waiter boy breaking plates who attracts his attention. It amuses him at first but soon he realizes that the past himself is exactly the same. Rereading the progress report, Charlie sees his ignorant idea about his own situation and understands the importance of contributing his wisdom to this world. As Herman puts it, "survivors may focus their energies on helping others who have been similarly victimized.....to prevent others from being victimized in the future, or on attempts to bring offenders to justice" (p. 208). Through independent research, he wants to help millions of the intellectually disabled in America. The issue of being clever is not just about Charlie himself but about a huge population like him.

Additionally, he offers to go to the Warren State Home which is undoubtedly an enormous challenge. Charlie has some cognition of the person he used to be and of the damage done to him by the traumatic event. His task now is "to become the person he wants to be" (p. 202). In young Charlie's eyes, the Warren State Home is a horrible place which will separate him from his family. But now, he is courageous

to face the potential aftermath of this experiment by considering being sent into the nursing house. This visit reminds him of the virtue of devoting oneself to other people and the fact that intelligence has nothing to do with moral goodness. He starts to grasp the life philosophy as he is relieved to have experienced the peak of love, beauty, and truth created by knowledge. He retains a sense of respect, empathy, and wisdom, and memories of connections to many other people. All this is ultimately represented by his request for “wild flowers on the grave (for Algernon)” (p. 258). He loves the things that he is doing at present and comes closer and closer to the answer.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, trauma is a significant element in *Flowers for Algernon*. Owing to family members' dominance and indifference, the character Charlie Gordon internalizes his sense of shame. The social repulsion also discourages his ability to connect with others, aggravating the trauma. But upon the brain operation, he is able to recall and analyze some of painful memories. In this manner, he faces an identity crisis and adjusts improperly to the situation, which leads his action to be out of control. Most importantly, the decision to get away with Algernon provides safety for Charlie, driving him to remedy the trauma privately. Specifically, he is able to find himself by clearing the haziness of his feelings for the traumatic past, disturbed present, and predictable future. Then, he starts to form connections with others due to his belief in the society. Lastly, he makes up his mind to contribute to the society.

References

- Blackford, H. (2013). *Raw Shok and Modern Method: Child Consciousness in Flowers for Algernon and The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 38(3), 284-303. <https://doi.org/10.1353/chq.2013.0038>
- Bowen, M. (1976). Theory in the Practice of Psychotherapy. *Family Therapy: Theory and Practice*, 4(1), 2-90.
- Carlson, E. A., Egeland, B., & Sroufe, L. A. (2009). A Prospective Investigation of the Development of Borderline Personality Symptoms. *Development and Psychopathology*, 21, 1311-1134. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579409990174>
- Engel, B. (2015). *It Wasn't Your Fault: Freeing Yourself from the Shame of Childhood Abuse with the Power of Self-Compassion*. Oakland: New Harbinger Publications. Print.
- Freud, S. (1990). *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (Ed. James Strachey. Trans. Peter Gay). New York: W. W. Norton & Company. Print.
- Herman, J. L. (2015). *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books. Print.
- Keyes, D. (2005). *Flowers for Algernon*. Orlando: HarperCollins. Print.
- Palumbo, D. (2004). The Monomyth in Daniel Keyes's “*Flowers for Algernon*”: Keyes, Campbell and Plato. *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 56(2004), 427-446.

- Sklar, H. (2013). The Many Voices of Charlie Gordon: On the Representation of Intellectual Disability in Daniel Keyes's *Flowers for Algernon*. *Disability in Science Fiction: Representations of Technology as Cure* (pp. 47-59). New York: Palgrave Macmillan US.
https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137343437_4
- Ju, H. (2022). Stage Communication of the Musical *Flowers for Algernon*. *Art Panorama*, 32, 97-99.
- Luo, X. Y., & Yang, J. Y. (2022). Analysis and Critique of Chen Cheng's Chinese Translation of *Flowers for Algernon* from the Perspective of Skopos Theory. *Sinogram Culture*, 8, 150-151.
- Zhang, S. J. (1994). The Metaphorical Theme of Fatherhood. *Journal of Jinan University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 4, 94-100.