

## Disability and Family Institution in Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon*

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### Abstract:

The social attitudes towards disability vary according to the norms and facts that a certain society embraces, but mostly these attitudes are negative and rooted throughout time. This paper examines the family institution in Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon* (1966) and its effect on Charlie's disability, the protagonist with a low IQ, through the lens of the Critical Disability Theory. The analysis shows the significant role that Charlie's family has in creating disability and his negative view of himself. Also, it shows that family institutions have power over the individual, but it is also a tool through which other institutions impose their standards.

Keywords: (ableism, Critical Disability Theory, disability, family, *Flowers for Algernon*, society).

الإعاقة ومؤسسة العائلة في "زهور من أجل ألبيرنون" لكيز

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ملخص:

تختلف السلوكيات الاجتماعية تجاه الإعاقة حسب المعايير والوقائع التي تتبناها مجتمعات معينة، ولكن في الغالب تكون هذه المواقف سلبية ولها جذور قديمة. يُركز هذا البحث على مؤسسة العائلة في "زهور من أجل ألبيرنون" لكيز (١٩٦٦) وتأثيرها على إعاقة تشارلي، البطل ذو معدل الذكاء المنخفض، من منظور نظرية الإعاقة النقدية. يظهر التحليل الدور الكبير الذي لعبته عائلة تشارلي في خلق إعاقة ونظرته السلبية تجاه نفسه. كما توضح هذه الدراسة أن مؤسسات العائلة لها سلطة على الفرد، بيد أنها تمثل أيضاً أداة تُفرض من خلالها معايير المؤسسات الأخرى.

الكلمات المفتاحية: (التمييز ضد ذوي الإعاقة، نظرية الإعاقة النقدية، الإعاقة، العائلة، زهور من أجل ألبيرنون، المجتمع).

Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon* (1966) is classified as a science fiction novel for which he is best known. Five million copies were sold, translated into twenty–seven languages, and adapted into movies, plays, television shows, and operas. It acquired great attention worldwide due to its sensitive topic at the time of its publication. Keyes (1927–2014) is an American writer and professor, he holds a degree in psychology and English literature. His interest in the human mind and behavior encouraged him to register in the psychology department, alongside his passion for writing, his major paved the way for his career as a writer. He reflected on his experience in life through his works,

shedding light on some aspects that quite often people fail to perceive, in an attempt to answer them, such as disability.

By the time Keyes wrote his novel, activists had been advocating for disability rights since the 1940s. After the two great wars, societies were healing from social, economic, and moral destruction, a time in which people became aware of the increased number of persons with disabilities as war casualties and other causes. The Civil Rights movement of the sixties and the disability movements gave rise to people with disabilities and the discrimination they faced in everyday life, (Neuhaus 49) In this period, disability issues were acknowledged, and this marked the turning point in the history of disability, especially, mental disability, because of President John F. Kennedy (1917– 1963), who, his sister, Rosemary, was intellectually disabled. Kennedy issued a message to Congress in 1963 asking to support Americans with mental disabilities. He signed the Community Mental Health Act (CMHA) which provided funding for research centers to work on improving the lives of the mentally disabled. (The History Engine)

As a case within everyday context, this remarkable moment for disability rights had an impact on literature. Keyes is one of the pioneers of this period in tackling disability as a main issue in his work. *Flowers For Algernon* is his first novel that is written during the escalation of events, and after that, he wrote many books tackling mental illnesses and psychological issues, *The Touch* (1968), *The Minds of Billy Milligan* (1981), *Unveiling Claudia* (1986), *The Asylum Prophecies* (2009) and many others.

In this period, the American society was changing. It was the time of technology, computers, and electronics in America. The time when, the term "artificial intelligence", was first used by John McCarthy in 1955, and paved the way for cognitive psychology studies, and interest in the human brain as a machine. Also, the launch of the first weather satellite in 1960, and the invention of color television in 1965, helped to boost interest in shows alongside many other technological advances. (Ryder 7,8)

Ultimately, the required taste of the time reflected in literature, and many science fiction magazines were published, among them is *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* (1949) by Mercury Press, which was one of the leading in its field. The magazine published many stories by writers: Richard Matheson's "*Born of Man and Woman*", Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee*, and Keyes' short story version of *Flowers for Algernon*. Yet, *Flowers for Algernon* is chosen in this study as a first-person point-of-view novel, and the study is not concerned with its genre, although the genre itself has a relation to disability studies, as in Kathryn Allan's

*Disability in Science Fiction: Representations of Technology as Cure* (2013).

The novel is from a first-person point of view. It is written in the form of "progress reports". It pictures life and the challenges that the mentally retarded character Charlie Gordon goes through concerning work, school, and family relations. Charlie Gordon, the protagonist, is a thirty-two-year-old man who is of a low IQ of seventy. Works in a bakery with his uncle's friend Mr. Donner after his parents, Rose and Matt, abandon him and his uncle dies. His ambition is to be smart just like other people in his community, and he is willing to do anything to get this goal, so he enrolls in Miss Alice Kinnian's class at Beekman College for Retarded Adults. On a certain instance, he is chosen to be the first human being to be tested on undergoing an operation that – if it works as planned– increases human intelligence. The operation is tested on a lab mouse named Algernon and succeeds up to the moment of Charlie's operation. He agrees to do it to meet the desire to be smart.

The operation works over stages, this is shown by Charlie's spelling and grammar while he is documenting his progress. He becomes a genius with an IQ higher than 185, but things do not work as he expects, as he is cast aside as less than the others when he is retarded and then, he is cast aside for being exactly the opposite, and even a greater gap than before the operation. He cannot accept the fact that he is treated as a "guinea pig" by the doctors and as a freak by his co-workers. His memory becomes so strong that he remembers his parents' shame of his mental

disability and his co-workers' bullying him. Because of his smartness, he could not get involved with people around him and got rejected as before but for the opposite reasons. He gets depressed especially after Algernon dies chances being a side effect of the operation. Charlie develops a kind of emotional bond with the lap mouse since they are treated the same and compared to each other throughout the novel, and although Charlie knows that Algernon's health may decline and die, he cannot cope with his loss. Charlie keeps visiting Algernon's grave and brings him flowers. when Charlie's mental abilities decline, he gets back to his previous status at Warren State Institution, leaving the end open to speculate as to what might happen later.

The novel predicted a unique topic since it tackled a sensitive topic that people at that time failed to be aware of and could not relate to or notice. Forty years after publishing the novel, Keyes wrote a kind of autobiography related to the events that led to writing the novel. In *Algernon, Charlie, and I* (1999), he goes through his writing process, stating that the main reason behind writing this autobiography is that "Charlie is haunting me", Keyes could not shake loose Charlie out of his sight and mind every single day for the past forty years since writing the novel. (Keyes 1) He shared the striking incident that inspired him to create Charlie's character, in the first day of teaching the Special Modified English classes, one of the students calls it "A dummy class ... for stupid people..." and then tells him "If I try hard and I get smart by the end of the term, will you put me in a regular class? I want to be smart." (77) Keyes

states that the statement "I want to be smart" has been haunting him ever since, the fact that people with learning or intelligence limitation being aware of it and want to change it, made him change his view over preconceived ideas related to them. (77)

This incident of real life with Keyes raises questions about why the boy sees it as a "dummy class" and why he desires to be smart. Who told him this in the first place? or what made him feel that way? These questions are to be answered through the analysis of the family institution as a part of the society in which Charlie Gordon's character lives, the analysis exposes the ableist assumptions that are imposed on him through the lens of Critical Disability Theory (CDT)

Ableism is a term that emerged from the disability rights movement in the 1960s, with an interdisciplinary origin. It is used as an analytical tool by those who study disability as a social construction. It is defined as "ideas, practices, institutions, and social relations that presume able-bodiedness, and by so doing, construct persons with disabilities as marginalized ... and largely invisible 'others'" (qtd. in Michelle 5) but, disability affects even those with able bodies as some impairments are not visible like mental and sensory disability.

CDT is a theoretical approach to disability; it goes under the umbrella of disability studies that emerged in the last decades. The theory criticizes the traditional negative view on disability, (Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz 3) claiming that "disability is not fundamentally a question of medicine or health, nor is it just an issue of sensitivity and compassion;

rather, it is a question of politics and power(lessness), power over, and power to"(Pothier and Devlin2). CDT assumes that disability is a social construction, not a consequence of impairment. It is constructed due to a complex relationship among three factors, impairment, the individual's response to the impairment, and the social environment. These three combined create the negative attitude that disabled people experience in their societies. (Hosking7)

Generally, Charlie's disability is constructed by a complex interaction among three factors: Charlie's low IQ, his own response to it, and his environment's response to it. (Hosking 7) Throughout the text, Charlie's mother insists on making her son "normal" as other kids, to the extent that she becomes obsessed and ignores her son's emotional needs. Charlie's mother is the perfect example of how disciplinary power works on the individual's beliefs, it programs them so they discipline themselves and act according to what the system of surveillance wants, (Tremain 621). She is a victim of medical knowledge, she takes whatever they say for granted without questioning it, ignores what Charlie tries to say, and listens to what doctors say about his condition. In the incident, when she takes Charlie to Dr. Guarino despite Matt's will, she believes that Charlie is "going to be normal, whatever we have to do, whatever it costs.". (Keyes, *Flowers for Algernon* 135) She is an easy bite to be manifested by the medical institution, the previous incident is a clear indication, Dr. Guarino wants to make sure that Charlie's parents will bring him again to the clinic, he tells Charlie "I want you to tell your mom how



smart you feel ",(140) the doctor chooses the mother over the father, although his father is the one who has the money, because the mother is easily manipulated.

Looking at the role of Charlie's mother in his life, there is a clear indication that his mother mainly planted the idea of being smart in his head. When Charlie asks where they are going, she answers that they are going to the doctor to make him smart. When the Dr asks Charlie what he is doing here 'he recalls his mother's words. "Make me smart". On the other side, Charlie's father is not conceited about Rose's behavior. (135)

On that day when she argues with Matt over Charlie's capability to sit in a regular class, Charlie is overwhelmed by their fight and he needs to go to the bathroom, whenever Charlie is frightened, he needs to go to the bathroom, but no one listens to his needs and when he dirties himself, he is punished, but his mother insists to act according to "the book" that claims Charlie should go to the bathroom by himself so he can feel confident and a sense of achievement. It seems that the book is not always right because Charlie does it on himself and his mother gets angry and disappointed. (74-75)

Too much dependence on science to find a cure instead of accepting reality, created distance between Charlie and the world. For his mother, Rose, Charlie is not normal, and she knows that is why she keeps trying to fix him, although she says on many pages that Charlie is "normal". The main problem is that Charlie is different, but this difference

is looked at with shame and as a stigma. The continuous argument between Rose and Matt over Charlie throughout the novel shows this point. Rose wants Charlie to act like others and pushes him to do that although it is out of his ability. (71-75) On the other side, Matt accepts the fact his son is not like others and does not try to change it, that is to fix him.

When Charlie writes his progress reports, the first time he mentions his mother is before the operation. One of the things that he wants to do after the operation is to impress his mother who always wanted him to be smart, he also mentions that his mother always treated him like a sick person "I dont rimember how I was sick. I think it was about me not being smart." (18,19) she asks him what is beyond his ability, and punishes him because he cannot do it. (61) Above all, she is ashamed of Charlie and looks at him with disgust, which reflects how he views himself. (142) Later in the novel, when Charlie grows intellectually, Charlie understands his mother's behavior towards him:

Now I can see where I got the unusual motivation for becoming smart that so amazed everyone at first. It was something Rose Gordon lived with day and night. Her fear, her guilt, her shame that Charlie was a moron. Her dream that something could be done. The urgent question always: whose fault was it, hers or Matt's? Only after Norma proved to her that she was capable of having normal children, and that I was a freak, did she stop trying to make

me over. But I guess I never stopped wanting to be the smart boy she wanted me to be, so that she would love me. (144)

Rose may have many motives to make her act this way towards her son, Charlie, besides the fact, that she is also subject to the medical institution. Her motives may be clearer by studying her character as the "devouring mother" archetype. A devouring mother is a mother who believes that her children are part of her and the way they look and are perceived by others is a reflection of her as if her identity is bonded to theirs, so she becomes over-controlling of her children, consumes them, and tries to achieve some sense of fulfillment through them. she loves her children but it is rather a selfish love that meets with her interests, and often she does that believing that she is acting good and protecting them, to the extent that she may use violence emotionally and physically. (Nair) These characteristics apply to Charlie's mother, and the side effects of living with such a mother are clear in Charlie's life and personality, the fact that she is a devouring mother who worked on constructing Charlie's disability.

At first, she does everything she can to fix Charlie, but things change when she gives birth to her second child, Norma. When Norma is born, Rose is extremely protective and keeps Charlie away from her, to the extent that she hits him when he comes close to Norma, although he never thinks of hurting her. (37) In one incident her shame of having an "abnormal" child, like Charlie, makes her decide to "be put away... with his own kind"(170) Until the sixties, people still thought that mentally disabled

people are dangerous, and are cast away, they were feared, locked out and this is the leftovers of the long centuries of discriminations towards the disabled. (Neuhaus 46)

Later when Charlie gets smart and goes to meet his mother, he sees her working and cleaning although she is old and seems sick, he states that his mother works hard to be a good wife and mother (Keyes, *Flowers for Algernon* 260). In general, women were still fighting for equality and security, responsible for their houses, and expected to be perfect. Charlie's existence is a reminder that she is not a perfect woman because her son, being a part of her, is not perfect. This is why she is obsessed with fixing him, and when she cannot, she throws him away with no mercy. It may be the reason why the first thing that comes to her mind when she meets him again is her friends and neighbors who used to see her son as not normal. She wants to prove them wrong. (167)

The way that Rose treated Charlie made Norma hate her brother although he never hurt her. Her mother raises her on the stereotypical view of disability and she grows up feeling superior to Charlie. This is evidently how a negative attitude towards disability is passed through time and people. On the other hand, Society exerts much pressure, not only on persons with the disability themselves but also on their families. Rose decides to send Charlie away because Norma is bullied for having a retarded brother "We can't destroy her chance for a normal life because of him" (184), at this point, Rose chooses Norma because she can have a normal life, but Charlie, for her, is a lost cause anyway, "He's better off

dead. He'll never be able to live a normal life". (185) The theme of "being put away" is recurrent in almost every story concerning disability. Being put away means: exclusion is something that persons with disabilities encounter if they do not act according to the "laws" of able-bodied people.

Norma is raised by her mother thinking that Charlie is a bad influence on her life and future. She feels superior to her brother because she has better grades at school, and she is rude to him although Matt, the father, tells her not to have this attitude towards her big brother. When her parents do not get her a dog as a reward for her high mark in class, she threatens them to be a "dummy" like Charlie, which happens to be her mother's greatest nightmare. Additionally, she tells her friends that Charlie is not her real brother, he is adopted. (115–119) The fact of having a disabled child in the family as adopted seems to be a noble act, feeling sorry and pity for some weak creature and deciding to help him out of being better, and stronger. While having a disabled child of their own means that they have a flaw in their genes, meaning they can pass distortion to the next generations. This takes to Francis Galton who termed the Eugenics movement in 1883, disability is a source of crime, poverty, and social problems, so they have to prevent passing their genes to stop crime and social problems. (Neuhaus 46,48)

When Norma gets older and attends school, the kids bully her because of her brother, calling her "Moron's Sister" and "Dummy Gordon Family"(Keyes, *Flowers for Algernon* 272), she is only a child, and cannot understand why society is cruel to her although she is not disabled. Only

when she grows up without him, she forgets her memories with him and how she feels about him, she meets him as a smart, grown man and welcomes him warmly. Norma's attitude towards Charlie is a microscopic example of different attitudes to disability even if they were from the same person. When they were children, Norma hated Charlie and saw herself as superior.(118) Later, they grow up separated from each other, and when the scientific foundation takes her permission to use Charlie as a "Guinea pig" for the operation, she gives the permission, though she knows it is an experiment and the consequences of the operation are not known. She does not give his existence much importance, believing that Charlie's existence is of no importance, he does not have something better to do than sacrifice himself. Yet, when he gets smart and famous, she brags about him as if it is her achievement. (270)

Another face to the issue in the same family and society is his father, Matt, who has a completely different attitude towards Charlie. He constitutes an example of resistance to the ableist view on disability. Throughout the novel, he is supportive, and understanding, encouraging Rose to accept her son and to love him (143). He keeps defending Charlie and tells Rose that he is not harmful (170) and although Charlie's mother's attitude changes before and after having Norma, his father does not, for him, Norma and Charlie are the same, and he understands his son's differences and special needs, but he does not create a "hierarchy of difference" between him and his sister or others to his age. His aim is to let Charlie live and act the way he can and like.

To not create a "hierarchy of difference" it is when the difference between the disabled and the able-bodied is acknowledged and "confronted" but without preferring one group over another. For persons with disabilities, the difference must be taken into consideration to achieve equality, and equality is achieved by giving disabled persons the opportunity of "full inclusion and participation" in society and working on creating the perfect environment to achieve this goal. Ignoring differences in disability cases is not working for the good, as Pothier and Devlin give the example of entering a building, "If a sign says that all are welcome, then gender or race is not an absolute barrier to getting in the door, but a set of stairs is an absolute barrier for a wheelchair user." So, "disability demands a coming to terms with difference". (Pothier and Devlin 12,14)

In the incident when Norma wants a dog only for herself, Matt forbids it unless she shares it with Charlie, and takes care of the dog together. Charlie's memories with his father are warm, he states:

Matt had been willing to take me as I was. Before Norma: the arguments that weren't about money or impressing the neighbors were about me—that I should be let alone instead of being pushed to do what other kids did. And after Norma: that I had a right to a life of my own even though I wasn't like other children. Always defending me." (Keyes, *Flowers for Algernon* 181,182)

But he is not strong enough to change the family's view of Charlie, in the whole novel and among all the characters, only Matt does not act negatively towards Charlie and defends him. One character who accepts

Charlie and all others do not, may illustrate the percentages of those with positive views on disability in reality compared to the number of negative ones.

In conclusion, the family institution, alongside other institutions can be a power that supports disability or rejects it. It seems that Charlie's family has a significant role in creating his disability. His mother is a subject to the medical power and she believes them to be right. His sister is selfish and does not understand his difference. Only his father accepts him, yet he does not of an effect on his life. The family attitude has a great role in building Charlie's view of himself and accepting his condition.

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