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Language Transformation and Subjectivity: A Lacanian Psychological Literary Criticism of Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon*

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***Abstract*—This study examines subjectivity construction, stabilization, and disintegration in Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon*, highlighting language as the main narrative mechanism for producing subjectivity. Using narratological, stylistic, and Lacanian psychoanalytic frameworks, the analysis views subjectivity not as a stable psychological essence but as a fragile, language-dependent formation via narrative discourse. Through qualitative close reading, the study analyzes Charlie Gordon's first-person progress reports, focusing on linguistic markers of subjectivity, including spelling patterns, syntactic complexity, vocabulary range, narrative coherence, and self-referential expressions. The findings show early non-standard linguistic forms place Charlie at symbolic discourse margins, while subsequent linguistic stabilization allows reflective self-positioning and symbolic integration. However, this stability is temporary, as linguistic deterioration leads to narrative fragmentation and self-referential authority disintegration. A Lacanian reading of the Imaginary and Symbolic orders shows narrative coherence moments correspond to imaginary identification, while symbolic regulation introduces abstraction and alienation, and its breakdown results in narrative subjectivity disintegration. The study argues *Flowers for Algernon* constructs subjectivity as a precarious narrative achievement sustained through language, not an inherent psychological constant, offering a language-centered perspective to literary discussions of identity, narrative voice, and subject formation.**

Index Terms*—narrative subjectivity, linguistic transformation, Lacanian psychoanalysis, first-person narrative, *Flowers for Algernon

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I. INTRODUCTION

Literary narratives do more than tell stories; they shape how subjectivity becomes intelligible within language (Arafah et al., 2026). In many contemporary theories of narrative identity, the self is not treated as a stable psychological core that exists prior to discourse. Instead, it takes form through the temporal and structural organisation of narrative (Meretoja, 2014; Ricoeur, 1991). Fiction, therefore, does not simply open a window into a character's inner life. What readers encounter as "consciousness" is carefully constructed through linguistic choices, narrative perspective, and patterns of focalization. As Fludernik (1996) suggests, fictional consciousness is produced through discourse rather than retrieved from an interior mental space. Herman (2002) further demonstrates that voice, deixis, and focalisation organise how readers position a narrative subject. From this angle, characters emerge gradually within the texture of language. Their identities are not preformed psychological entities but effects of narrative design. Language functions as a symbolic system that encodes cultural values and social positioning (Takwa et al., 2026a), influencing how characters are perceived and understood within the narrative framework.

Stylistic and linguistic approaches to narrative emphasize language. Banfield (1982) argues that "inner consciousness" in fiction is not retrieved from psychological depth but constructed through grammar—through tense, sentence structure, and thought representation. Lodge (2002) notes that novels render consciousness through narrative voice and syntactic organisation rather than direct psychological access. Stockwell (2002) shows how changes in linguistic perspective guide interpretation of fictional minds. These accounts suggest that subjectivity in narrative fiction is produced within language itself, shaped by discourse organization rather than an assumed interior essence.

Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon* demonstrates how language shapes subjectivity. As the novel comprises Charlie Gordon's progress reports, readers witness his transformation through his writing. This appears first in spelling mistakes, repetitive phrasing, and short, uneven sentences in his early entries. Charlie struggles with vocabulary and interpretation. His limited linguistic range restricts how he understands and articulates experience, echoing sociological analyses of how social norms and linguistic standards influence identity formation (Mare et al., 2025). After the operation, the writing changes. Sentences grow longer and more structured. Abstract terms appear. Charlie reflects on his past and analyzes his relationships. Language seems to grant him a stronger position within discourse. Yet this control weakens. Spelling errors return, syntax becomes unstable, and reports lose coherence. The arc from linguistic expansion to decline suggests that subjectivity is neither fixed nor secure. It depends on sustaining language. When that ability falters, the narrative self fractures. The erosion of linguistic competence may disrupt continuity of identity and participation in symbolic systems (Jamiluddin et al., 2026).

Flowers for Algernon has been widely discussed, but readings focus on Charlie Gordon's intelligence changes. Critics frame his transformation in terms of cognitive enhancement, mental health, disability, or ethics. These approaches view language changes as signs of psychological development rather than narrative structure components. Culler (1997) warns against this psychological reductionism, where interpretation moves from textual form to external explanatory models. In contrast, narratological and stylistic approaches focus on discourse. Here, subjectivity in fiction doesn't just mirror mental conditions; it is created within narrative structure and linguistic design (Takwa et al., 2026b). Psychological approaches to literature do not treat fictional characters as clinical case studies. Instead, they recognize that a character's "inner life" is shaped by narrative form and linguistic mediation. Barry (2017) makes this point: literary characters cannot be diagnosed as empirical subjects; they must be interpreted through close reading. A similar emphasis appears in Indonesian scholarship. Arafah (2018) argues that identity in literary texts emerges from narrative strategy and linguistic patterning rather than generalised psychological categories. Bennett and Royle (2016) caution against assuming fictional consciousness is hidden behind the text. It is produced within the text. Felski (2015) extends this by suggesting literature does not simply reflect psychology but reshapes how inner life becomes meaningful within culture. These positions redirect attention to form, encouraging us to examine how subjectivity is constructed in discourse rather than searching for psychological essence behind it. This orientation frames the present study's focus on language as the central site of subject formation.

Discourse-orientated approaches begin from a premise: subjectivity in fiction does not pre-exist the text. It takes shape within language. Characters emerge through narrative voice, patterns of syntax, and discourse organization. Rather than searching for an inner psychological core, critics examine how identity is articulated through textual features such as focalisation, lexical choice, and grammatical structure (Arafah & Hasyim, 2019). Lacanian psychoanalysis emphasizes this focus on language. For Lacan, the subject forms within the Symbolic Order—the network of signifiers that structures meaning. His claim that "the unconscious is structured like language" (Lacan, 2006) reframes subjectivity as a linguistic process rather than a hidden essence. From this view, changes in language can signal shifts in a character's position within symbolic structures (Arafah et al., 2026). Linguistic transformation becomes more than stylistic variation; it marks movement within the system that produces the subject (Taqdir et al., 2026).

Building on this theoretical framework, the analysis examines the role of language in *Flowers for Algernon*. Linguistic change is not treated as mere reflection of cognitive development, but as the process through which Charlie's subjectivity takes shape, shifts, and fractures. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalytic criticism—especially the concepts of the Imaginary and the Symbolic—the discussion traces how Charlie's evolving language marks changes in his position within symbolic structures. This approach positions language as the primary site where identity forms in the novel. By emphasising discourse rather than psychological essence, the study contributes to debates that position narrative language

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as constitutive rather than descriptive of fictional selves. Similar arguments about discourse's formative power appear beyond literary studies—in research on educational texts that shape gendered and social identities (Taqdir et al., 2025), and in eco-literary scholarship that regards literature as influencing ethical awareness (Manugeren et al., 2023). Such perspectives reinforce that language does not simply represent subjectivity; it participates in producing it (Yudith et al., 2023).

II. Literature Review

Literary studies assert narrative fiction's subjectivity is constructed through language and discourse, not psychological interiority. Narratologists show fictional consciousness is shaped by voice, focalization, and linguistic choices. Fludernik (1996) defines fictional consciousness as strategies enabling readers to understand character perspective. Herman (2002) shows narrative subjectivity is constructed through focalisation and deixis. Characters' identities are constituted through language rather than preceding discourse. Banfield (1982) argues subjectivity in fiction is embedded in narrative sentences. Tense, modality, and speech and thought representation shape how mind becomes legible in text. Stylistic critics examine how syntactic patterns and lexical choices guide readers' perception of cognitive stance (Leech & Short, 2007; Stockwell, 2002). Linguistic form organizes perspective and mediates between narrating voice and experiencing self. Studies of ritual and cultural discourse show how patterned language produces shared imagery in socio-cultural contexts (Arafah et al., 2026; Takwa et al., 2024). Such findings reinforce that language structures meaning, suggesting shifts in character speech indicate changes in narrative positioning.

This language-centred orientation is reflected in Indonesian literary scholarship, where character identity and ideological positioning are examined through discourse-based analysis. Arafah (2018) posits that we should analyse character identity in literary texts using narrative discourse and linguistic patterns, not psychological generalisations. Studies demonstrate this orientation by analysing character education values, emotional regulation, gender domination, racial discrimination, parenting styles, and animal representation as discursive constructions in narrative language (Arafah et al., 2024; Arafah et al., 2023e; Asri et al., 2023; Mutmainnah et al., 2022). These works reinforce that literary characters are textual effects shaped by narrative strategies, symbolic structures, and linguistic choices (Sunyoto et al., 2022; Yudith et al., 2024).

Language and subjectivity discussions extend into applied linguistics, showing that access to linguistic systems shapes self-positioning and cognition (Arafah & Hasyim, 2023a). Digital literacy regulates how individuals evaluate information, negotiate credibility, and position themselves in mediated discourse (Arafah & Hasyim, 2023b). Studies on self-regulated writing, AI-assisted composition, grammar instruction, and online material design show linguistic competence structures thought organisation and articulation (Arnawa & Arafah, 2023; Kaharuddin et al., 2024; Kuswanty et al., 2023; Arafah et al., 2023c; Arafah et al., 2023d). Though rooted in educational contexts, these findings converge on a premise: language not only transmits ideas but conditions how meaning is constructed and how subjects position themselves within discourse. Cultural linguistics shows linguistic forms are rooted in shared mental schemas and cultural conceptualisations, influencing how individuals interpret and engage with language in social contexts.

In literary theory, psychoanalysis is crucial in theorising subjectivity. Early Freudian criticism saw literary texts as symbolic of unconscious conflict, but Lacan placed the subject within language. His idea that “the unconscious is structured like a language” (Lacan, 2006) re identity as an effect of signification, not a stable psychological interior. Evans (1996) clarifies the Lacanian subject is divided, formed through signifiers and social laws in the Symbolic Order. In literature, such regulation often appears in structured systems, like class hierarchy and social convention, as shown in sociological analyses of Edwardian fiction (Rano et al., 2026). These perspectives affirm subjectivity emerges within symbolic and social structures, not from autonomous interiority.

Symbolic structures operate through class hierarchy and culturally embedded ethical systems (Effendy et al., 2025). Studies of indigenous governance show codified norms regulate leadership conduct and institutional legitimacy (Arafah et al., 2025), highlighting their importance in maintaining community cohesion and ensuring leader accountability. Semiotic analyses of digital texts show meaning arises through interaction between denotative and connotative levels structured by symbolic exchange between text and reader (Hasyim & Arafah, 2023). Discourse-oriented studies of digital literacy reinforce this by demonstrating how linguistic competence shapes interpretation and positioning within mediated narratives (Arafah & Hasyim, 2023b). These findings strengthen the claim that subjectivity is structured through participation in symbolic linguistic systems.

Research on technology-mediated engagement suggests digital platforms reorganise linguistic navigation, influencing meaning-making (Idhan et al., 2026) and narrative interpretation in literary studies. Language shapes participation in symbolic life by determining interpretive frameworks. Johnson (2013) shows narrative voice shifts articulate subjectivity, while Korkmaz Karaman (2022) demonstrates linguistic experiments embody subject formation in modernist fiction. These studies establish subjectivity in literature as a discursive effect via narrative organisation. Lacanian criticism views linguistic changes as shifts in subject position, not intellectual progress. "*Flowers for Algernon*" has been examined through ethics, psychology, disability studies, and cognitive development, focusing on Charlie Gordon's intelligence changes to explore mental health and social exclusion. Çelikel (2020) examines the novel through madness and institutional power, showing intelligence increases Charlie's psychological suffering. These studies offer ethical insights but treat linguistic change as a symptom of cognitive transformation. Poltoratska (2025) highlights Charlie's linguistic

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evolution as a strategy to foster empathy and expose intellectual disability stigma. This approach acknowledges language's importance but views change through social perception, without examining language as a condition of subjectivity. The Lacanian approach remains limited, as psychoanalytic readings prioritize psychological states over linguistic transformations.

Studies on structured linguistic practice show patterned language improves writing clarity (Suparti et al., 2025). However, these discussions rarely extend to literary narrative, where language change signifies more than style. In *Flowers for Algernon*, Charlie Gordon's evolving language traces shifting subject positions within symbolic structures. Narratological theories and Lacanian psychoanalysis position language as central to subjectivity but are seldom combined in readings of Charlie's reports. Most interpretations focus on psychological development or intelligence, reducing the narrative to a case study and overlooking discourse articulation of subjectivity. This analysis combines narratology, stylistic linguistics, and Lacanian psychoanalysis to examine *Flowers for Algernon*, emphasizing changes in Charlie Gordon's first-person reports. Variations in spelling, syntax, vocabulary, coherence, and self-reference signal shifts within the Imaginary and Symbolic Orders, Lacanian concepts of human experience and identity. Rather than treating linguistic developments as plot incidental, the discussion approaches them as constitutive of narrative self. Through this lens, subjectivity emerges not as a stable essence but as a textual formation unraveling within discourse.

III. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative literary research design based on close textual analysis. Qualitative methods are commonly used in literary studies to interpret meaning and subjectivity as textual constructions, rather than as empirically measurable phenomena (Barry, 2017). Therefore, this study does not aim to diagnose psychological states or measure cognitive development but to interpret how subjectivity is narratively constructed through language.

The primary data source is Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon* (2004 edition), which focuses on the first-person progress reports written by the protagonist, Charlie Gordon. In this study, *Flowers for Algernon* is regarded as primary literary data, and the progress reports are examined as textual artifacts that construct narrative voice, linguistic form, and subjectivity within the fictional discourse (Keyes, 2004). These progress reports serve as the narrative medium of the novel and provide sequential records of linguistic transformation. Data were collected through intensive reading of the text, with relevant quotations selected based on observable changes in spelling, syntax, vocabulary range, narrative coherence, and self-referential expression.

Data analysis was conducted through close reading informed by narratological and Lacanian psychoanalytic literary frameworks. Subjectivity was examined as a discursive construction produced in language, drawing on the Lacanian concept of the Symbolic Order as the domain in which identity is formed through signification (Lacan, 2006). The discourse-orientated perspective aligns with literary studies that emphasise discourse and narrative structure as the primary sites of meaning formation rather than psychological explanations (Arafah, 2018; Culler, 1997).

IV. Results and Discussion

A. Linguistic Markers of Subjectivity in Charlie Gordon's Progress Reports

In *Flowers for Algernon*, Charlie Gordon's subjectivity is not conveyed through explicit psychological commentary but unfolds through the evolving language of his first-person progress reports. Because the narrative consists entirely of these written entries, linguistic shifts become the primary means through which changes in his position as a subject can be traced. What appears to be cognitive development is, at the level of the text, a transformation in how experience is structured, interpreted, and linguistically organised over time.

Empirical research in language development lends support to this connection between linguistic competence and expressive capacity. Studies show that structured reading practice and vocabulary enrichment significantly enhance speaking performance, indicating that access to linguistic resources directly affects self-articulation (Kaharuddin et al., 2023; Usman et al., 2024). From a theoretical standpoint, conceptual metaphor theory further clarifies this process by arguing that abstract experience is organised through patterned linguistic mappings rather than simply ornamented by language (Baa et al., 2023), in this sense, language does not decorate thought—it structures it.

Accordingly, this analysis focuses on recurring textual features in Charlie's writing—spelling stability, syntactic complexity, vocabulary range, narrative coherence, and self-referential expressions—to examine how subjectivity is gradually constructed, provisionally stabilised, and eventually destabilised. These features function not as surface stylistic markers of intelligence but as linguistic mechanisms that organise cognitive and affective states within the narrative. The discussion begins with spelling, the most immediately visible indicator of Charlie's shifting access to socially regulated language. Changes in orthographic control operate as indexical signs of movement between marginal and authorised identity positions, echoing sociolinguistic findings that linguistic variation serves as a resource for negotiating evolving identities in mediated contexts (Hasjim et al., 2026; Iksora et al., 2022).

1. Spelling Patterns

In *Flowers for Algernon*, spelling functions as the most immediate indicator of Charlie Gordon's shifting relation to socially regulated language. Orthographic control signals access to the symbolic system, whereas deviation suggests marginal positioning within it. Across the narrative, changes in spelling trace Charlie's fluctuating proximity to linguistic

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authority.

Data 1

"Dr Strauss says I shoud rite down what I think and remember and evrey thing that happins to me from now on"(Keyes, 2004, p. 1).

The phonetic spellings (e.g., *shoud, evrey, happins*) indicate that Charlie writes according to sound rather than convention. His language has not yet entered standardised symbolic regulation. Although he speaks in the first person, the narrative voice lacks institutional authority; subjectivity appears present but structurally limited by restricted access to socially codified language, which may hinder his ability to fully express complex ideas and emotions that require more formal linguistic structures.

Data 2

"I figured out a new way to set up the mixing machines in the bakery to speed up production" (Keyes, 2004, p. 59).

Here, orthographic accuracy is fully stabilised. The absence of spelling deviation reflects Charlie's integration into symbolic norms. Linguistic precision enables technical explanation and self-positioning as competent and rational. Spelling control thus marks a temporary authorisation within symbolic discourse.

Data 3

"I forget things and even when I rite them in my notbook sometimes I cant reed my own riting and its very hard" (Keyes, 2004, p. 30).

The reappearance of orthographic instability signals regression. Errors disrupt textual stability and expose the fragility of Charlie's symbolic position, indicating that the inconsistencies in spelling and grammar may lead to misunderstandings of his identity and experiences. Subjectivity remains grammatically present, yet its discursive foundation weakens. While spelling governs access at the surface level, syntactic organisation determines how experience is structured within the narrative.

2. Syntactic Complexity

If spelling marks entry into regulated language, syntax determines how thought is hierarchically organised. Shifts in sentence structure reveal the degree to which Charlie can interpret rather than merely report experience.

Data 4

"I had a test today and I think I faled it and I think mabye now they wont use me" (Keyes, 2004, p. 1).

This sentence relies on parataxis—clauses linked by repetition and simple conjunctions. The absence of subordination restricts analytical distance. Charlie records events sequentially but does not yet organise them causally or reflectively. Subjectivity here remains immediate rather than interpretive.

Data 5

"I told Strauss that I was too involved in thinking, reading, and digging into myself, trying to understand who and what I am" (Keyes, 2004, p. 113).

Embedded clauses and abstract phrasing demonstrate syntactic layering. Experience is subordinated, evaluated, and conceptually framed. Grammatical hierarchy enables introspection, signalling a more stable narrative subject capable of self-analysis.

Data 6

"I dont feel like riting any more progress reports" (Keyes, 2004, p. 20).

The contraction of syntax mirrors cognitive and affective contractions. Although self-awareness persists, the grammatical structure no longer sustains extended reflection, leading to a more fragmented expression of ideas and emotions. As syntactic complexity diminishes, narrative authority weakens, leading to a more fragmented and less coherent expression of ideas. Where syntax organises thought hierarchically, vocabulary determines the conceptual range available for articulation.

3. Vocabulary Range

Lexical selection, which refers to the process of choosing words to express ideas, shapes what can be conceptualised. Charlie's vocabulary expands during symbolic integration and contracts during decline, directly affecting the depth of his evaluative capacity.

Data 7

"because all my life I wantid to be smart and not dumb" (Keyes, 2004, p. 4).

Early vocabulary relies on binary oppositions—*smart* versus *dumb*. These socially imposed labels compress identity into simplified categories, limiting nuance and interpretive autonomy.

Data 8

"Now I understand one of the important reasons for going to college and getting an education is to learn that the things you've believed in all your life aren't true, and that nothing is what it appears to be" (Keyes, 2004, p. 71).

Here, abstraction and conceptual layering become possible. Charlie articulates epistemological uncertainty and metacognitive reflection. Lexical expansion enables differentiated evaluation and a more stable discursive identity.

Data 9

"writing is harder. I have to look up even simple words in the dictionary now and it makes me angry with myself" (Keyes, 2004, p. 303).

As vocabulary contracts, expression becomes affect-driven. The reduction in lexical resources limits complex

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articulation, narrowing subjectivity to frustration and immediacy. Vocabulary loss thus affects not only expression but also the capacity to sustain narrative coherence over time, leading to fragmented thoughts and difficulty in conveying complex ideas effectively.

4. Narrative Coherence

Beyond individual sentences, subjectivity depends on the ability to organise experience temporally and causally. Narrative coherence reflects whether the narrator can integrate events into a meaningful structure.

Data 10

"I had a test today and Dr Strauss and Miss Kinnian was there and I tried hard and I want to be smart" (Keyes, 2004, p. 1).

Events accumulate without causal linkage or evaluative framing. Experience is recorded but not narratively shaped. The self remains minimally constructed within discourse.

Data 11

"Now I understand one of the important reasons for going to college and getting an education is to learn that the things you've believed in all your life aren't true, and that nothing is what it appears to be" (Keyes, 2004, p. 71).

Past belief and present realisation are integrated within a unified framework. Temporal layering and evaluative positioning stabilise narrative identity.

Data 12

"I don't know where the time goes" (Keyes, 2004, p. 302).

Temporal disorientation signals fragmentation. Without continuity, narrative selfhood weakens. The inability to sustain coherence undermines the discursive construction of subjectivity.

5. Self-Referential Expressions

Finally, shifts in self-reference reveal how Charlie positions himself within discourse.

Data 13

"I want to be smart" (Keyes, 2004, p. 1).

The pronoun 'I' functions grammatically but lacks interpretive depth. Identity is externally defined rather than internally constructed.

Data 14

"Thinking about it makes me remember the time I fell asleep standing up and Frank kicked my legs out from under me. "It's me, and yet it's like someone else lying there—another Charlie" (Keyes, 2004, pp. 59-60).

Here, reflexive distancing becomes possible. Language allows Charlie to differentiate past and present selves, forming a layered narrative identity.

Data 15

"I don't know where the time goes" (Keyes, 2004, p. 302).

The pronoun remains, but temporal anchoring dissolves. Although self-reference's organizing function deteriorates, its form endures.

In the later stage, first-person references remain grammatically present, yet they no longer anchor a stable narrative identity. The pronoun "I" continues to appear, but it carries less interpretive control. What remains is a voice that speaks without fully sustaining coherence.

Taken together, these patterns show how Charlie's position in language shifts across the novel. His sense of self does not precede the narrative; it takes shape within it. Spelling, syntax, vocabulary, and narrative organisation interact rather than function in isolation. They form a network of discursive mechanisms through which the narrative self emerges, gains temporary stability, and gradually unravels. Linguistic change, therefore, cannot be reduced to a surface marker of intelligence. It registers movement within the structures that produce subjectivity in the first place.

B. From the Imaginary to the Symbolic: Lacanian Subjectivity in Charlie Gordon's Narrative Voice

Lacan does not treat the subject as a unified inner self. Instead, subjectivity takes form within language and the symbolic structures that organise it. Read from this angle, Charlie Gordon's narrative voice becomes more than a vehicle for reporting events. It is the space in which his position in language shifts and becomes visible.

As the progress reports evolve, changes in coherence, abstraction, and linguistic control reflect movement between the Imaginary and the Symbolic Orders. At certain moments, language appears to stabilise Charlie's sense of self; at others, it exposes division and fragmentation. What matters, then, is not only what Charlie narrates, but how his narration reorganises his relation to identification, authority, and loss within discourse.

1. Imaginary Identification and Narrative Coherence

Within Lacanian theory, the Imaginary Order is structured around identification with images of wholeness, coherence, and self-sufficiency. In *Flowers for Algernon*, certain moments in Charlie Gordon's narration temporarily generate this kind of unity. The narrative appears coherent, achievements align with recognition, and the self seems stabilised through reflected success rather than through symbolic differentiation.

Data 16

"I figured out a new way to set up the mixing machines in the bakery to speed up production. Mr. Donner says he will save costs and increase profits. He gave me a fifty-dollar bonus and a ten-dollar-a-week raise" (Keyes, 2004, p. 59).

The sequence unfolds smoothly: action leads to recognition, and recognition leads to reward. Events are arranged in a

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linear and affirmative pattern that reinforces a coherent self-image. The narrative logic confirms Charlie as capable and valued. This coherence, however, rests on identification with external validation, such as praise from peers or acknowledgment from authority figures. The unity achieved here derives from recognition and success, not from structural positioning within language. It is an image of wholeness sustained by affirmation.

Data 17

"It's me, and yet it's like someone else lying there—another Charlie" (Keyes, 2004, pp. 59-60).

In this moment, Charlie turns his narrative gaze upon himself. The distinction between past and present selves introduces reflexivity, yet the structure of comparison still depends on visual and affective recognition. He observes himself as an object "another Charlie" rather than articulating a divided subject structured by signifiers. The coherence remains imaginary: it depends on recognition and contrast, not on symbolic mediation. Because it is anchored in identification, this unity remains precarious and vulnerable to collapse, particularly when external factors challenge the individual's sense of self or when there is a lack of consistent recognition from others.

2. Entry into the Symbolic Order and Linguistic Regulation

Where the Imaginary offers unity through image, the Symbolic organises subjectivity through language, abstraction, and differentiation. Entry into this order does not merely require fluency; it involves submission to linguistic structures that exceed the self, which can lead to a transformation in one's identity and perception of reality. Charlie's narrative voice increasingly reflects this shift as abstraction, evaluative distance, and conceptual framing begin to govern his discourse, illustrating how he navigates the complexities of identity and meaning within the Symbolic order.

Data 18

"Now I understand one of the important reasons for going to college and getting an education is to learn that the things you've believed in all your life aren't true, and that nothing is what it appears to be" (Keyes, 2004, p. 71).

Here, experience is no longer narrated as immediate perception. Instead, Charlie formulates a general principle that surpasses personal circumstance, suggesting that universal truths can be derived from shared experiences rather than solely from individual perspectives. Belief is reinterpreted through epistemological doubt, and meaning is organised conceptually rather than experientially. The movement from "I experienced" to "I understand" signals a structural shift: knowledge is mediated through abstract language. In this moment, subjectivity is positioned within a system of signification that regulates truth beyond individual feeling, suggesting that our understanding of truth is shaped by collective frameworks rather than solely personal experiences.

This transition is accompanied by heightened awareness of language itself. Writing becomes a tool of independence and interpretation. Linguistic mastery no longer serves self-image but functions as authorisation within a shared symbolic framework.

Data 19

"Now I know what it means when they say 'to pull a Charlie Gordon"(Keyes, 2004, p. 41).

Here, Charlie recognises himself as a signifier within social discourse. His name becomes part of a linguistic network that categorises and circulates meaning. Identity is no longer grounded in reflection but in relational positioning within language, which means that an individual's sense of self is shaped by their interactions and relationships with others in various social contexts. The self emerges through differentiation—through how it is named and invoked by others, which highlights the importance of social interactions and cultural contexts in shaping one's identity.

Data 20

"Intelligence is one of the greatest human gifts. But all too often a search for knowledge drives out the search for love" (Keyes, 2004, p. 249).

This statement moves fully into abstraction. The claim is impersonal, universalised, and detached from immediate experience. Intelligence becomes a conceptual category rather than a personal achievement. The language of general principle replaces narrative immediacy, making it harder for individuals to connect emotionally with the concepts being discussed. Yet this symbolic articulation introduces division. Conceptual clarity exposes contradiction—knowledge and love are placed in tension. What appears as mastery simultaneously reveals loss. Linguistic precision sharpens awareness but distances the subject from affective certainty, leading to a struggle between intellectual understanding and emotional connection. The more fully Charlie occupies the Symbolic, the more he encounters alienation, as he becomes increasingly detached from his emotional experiences and personal connections. Symbolic integration thus stabilises subjectivity only temporarily. It enables abstraction and analytical depth, but at the cost of unity. The subject becomes structured, differentiated, and divided—capable of conceptual thought, yet increasingly estranged from affective coherence, leading to a fragmented sense of self that struggles to integrate emotional experiences with rational understanding.

3. Symbolic Disintegration and Narrative Fragmentation

Moments of decline in *Flowers for Algernon* are registered not through explicit confession, but through disruptions in language. As Charlie's condition worsens, his writing begins to show strain.

Data 21

"But writing is harder. I have to look up even simple words in the dictionary now and it makes me very angry with myself" (Keyes, 2004, p. 303).

Here, difficulty with writing is no longer a temporary obstacle but a structural limitation. Charlie remains aware of the loss; he can still name it. Yet the act of looking up words suggests that language no longer arrives with immediacy or

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control. Meaning must be chased, retrieved, and pieced together. The frustration he expresses is not only emotional but also discursive.

As this pattern continues, reading and rereading fail to secure comprehension. Repetition does not restore stability. Language persists at the level of mechanical form, but its capacity to sustain continuity across time weakens. What emerges is a fragmentation of narrative control: sentences remain, yet their organising force diminishes. In Lacanian terms, this moment can be understood as a loosening of symbolic coherence, where the structures that once stabilised Charlie's position in language begin to falter.

C. The Narrative Construction and Disintegration of Charlie Gordon's Subjectivity

Subjectivity in *Flowers for Algernon* ultimately proves to be a fragile narrative construction maintained through linguistic mediation. As Charlie Gordon's access to symbolic language weakens, the narrative voice that once organised his experiences and sense of self begins to crack. The following analysis examines how this breakdown unfolds within Charlie's first-person discourse, focusing on the erosion of narrative continuity, the collapse of self-recognition, and the outward displacement of meaning. Through these processes, subjectivity emerges not as a stable psychological core but as a language-dependent construction that dissolves when symbolic regulation can no longer be maintained.

1. Symbolic Strain and the Onset of Narrative Instability

\The decline does not occur abruptly. In the early stages, Charlie can still write and read, but something in the process feels strained. Coherence becomes harder to sustain.

Data 23

"But then it hit me like a fist against the side of my head that I didn't remember what I had to do… when I turned to read it, part of it had been erased and the rest didn't make sense" (Keyes, 2004, p. 287).

This moment captures more than forgetfulness. Charlie confronts a gap between writing and comprehension. The text is physically present, yet it no longer guarantees meaning. The phrase "didn't make sense" signals a rupture in continuity: sentences no longer connect across time in a reliable way. He rereads, but repetition does not restore clarity. The effort to recover meaning exposes its instability. Language remains visible on the page, but its organising force weakens. What once structured experience now produces anxiety. In Lacanian terms, this change can be understood as a loosening of the symbolic framework that previously sustained his position in discourse. Narrative authority does not disappear at once; it erodes, sentence by sentence.

As this erosion deepens, instability shifts from cognitive difficulty to affective distress. The fear is no longer only of forgetting, but of losing access to language itself.

2. Full Symbolic Disintegration and Narrative Fragmentation

As the decline progresses, language no longer provides stability. The breakdown is not only cognitive but structural: sentences lose cohesion, repetition replaces development, and the narrative voice shifts toward urgency rather than reflection.

Data 24

"Please… please… dont let me forget how to reed and rite…" (Keyes, 2004, p. 307).

The repetition of "please" interrupts syntactic flow and replaces explanation with appeal. Earlier in the narrative, Charlie analysed his condition through abstraction and reflection. Here, analysis disappears. What remains is a plea. The fear is no longer framed as an intellectual problem but as an immediate threat to existence. The fragmentation of spelling mirrors the instability of the voice itself, indicating that the disintegration of language reflects a deeper crisis in identity and communication. Language is still present, but it no longer organises experience; it exposes vulnerability, revealing how individuals struggle to articulate their feelings and thoughts in a world where traditional meanings have become unstable. In Lacanian terms, this moment suggests that the linguistic framework that once structured Charlie's position in discourse can no longer hold. The speaking "I" persists, yet it no longer anchors a coherent narrative identity. The voice becomes affective rather than interpretive.

3. The Narrative Disintegration of Subjectivity

In the final stage, the erosion becomes visible at the level of self-recognition. The first-person pronoun remains grammatically intact, but it no longer guarantees continuity between experience and identity.

Data 25

"Alice tells me I lie in bed for days and don't seem to know who or where I am" (Keyes, 2004, p. 295).

The sentence is striking because self-knowledge is mediated through another person. Charlie does not describe his condition directly; he reports what Alice tells him. This displacement signals a weakening of narrative authority. The "I" is grammatically present, but awareness of that "I" depends on external testimony. The result is not the disappearance of language but the thinning of its organising power. Self-reference becomes formal rather than reflective.

Data 26

"please if you get a chance put some flowers on Algernons grave in the bak yard" (Keyes, 2004, p. 311).

The final appeal completes this outward movement. Memory and responsibility are entrusted to the reader. Instead of narrating himself, Charlie asks others to preserve meaning for him. The request is simple, almost childlike, yet structurally significant: narrative continuity no longer rests within the speaking subject. At this point, subjectivity does not vanish; it dissolves into relation. What remains is a voice that reaches outward, no longer capable of sustaining its own symbolic position. The novel thus closes not with silence, but with a fragile gesture that reveals how deeply identity in this text

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depends on language.

V. Conclusion

Flowers for Algernon ultimately portrays subjectivity not as a stable psychological interior, but as a fragile narrative construction sustained through language. Charlie Gordon's progress reports demonstrate that identity in the novel emerges through specific linguistic mechanisms—spelling patterns, syntactic organisation, vocabulary range, narrative coherence, and self-referential expressions. These elements do not merely reflect intelligence; they structure how experience is ordered, interpreted, and narrated. The analysis shows that moments of linguistic stability allow Charlie to occupy a more coherent narrative position, enabling abstraction, reflection, and social positioning. However, this coherence remains provisional. As linguistic control diminishes, narrative continuity starts to disintegrate, and the first-person voice progressively loses its ability to maintain a cohesive sense of self. The "I" remains grammatically present, yet its authority as a site of interpretation diminishes. From a Lacanian viewpoint, this evolution demonstrates that subjectivity is facilitated by symbolic structures rather than rooted in psychological essence. Imaginary coherence offers transient unity, whereas symbolic integration fosters both conceptual clarity and alienation. When symbolic organisation deteriorates, subjectivity does not disappear entirely but becomes unstable and increasingly dependent on others for narrative validation. This study therefore contributes a language-centred reading of *Flowers for Algernon*, demonstrating that the novel constructs and destabilises subjectivity through narrative form itself. By foregrounding linguistic transformation as a traceable mechanism of subject formation, the analysis expands existing interpretations that prioritise psychological or ethical themes and instead highlights how first-person fiction stages identity as a discursive effect produced—and undone—through language.

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