

How does the theme of the poem
relate to our story?

RITA DOVE

DEMETER'S PRAYER TO HADES

This alone is what I wish for you: knowledge.
To understand each desire and its edge,
to know we are responsible for the lives
we change. No faith comes without cost,
no one believes without dying.
Now for the first time
I see clearly the trail you planted,
what ground opened to waste,
though you dreamed a wealth
of flowers.

There are no curses, only mirrors
held up to the souls of gods and mortals.
And so I give up this fate, too.
Believe in yourself,
go ahead—see where it gets you.



TITLE: Consider the title and make a prediction about what the poem is about.

PARAPHRASE: Translate the poem line by line into your own words on a literal level. Look for complete thoughts (sentences may be inverted) and look up unfamiliar words.

CONNOTATION: Examine the poem for meaning beyond the literal. Look for figurative language, imagery, and sound elements.

The stanza “trail you planted” refers to what Hades did - which must have ended badly because the “ground opened to waste”

ATTITUDE/TONE: Notice the speaker’s tone and attitude. Humor? Sarcasm? Awe?

SHIFTS: Note any shifts or changes in speaker or attitude. Look for key words, time change, punctuation.

TITLE: Examine the title again, this time on an interpretive level.

THEME: Briefly state in your own words what the poem is about (subject), then what the poet is saying about the subject (theme).

Flowers for Algernon, May 20

May 20—I would not have noticed the new dishwasher, a boy of about sixteen, at the corner diner where I take my evening meals if not for the incident of the broken dishes.

They crashed to the floor, shattering and sending bits of white china under the tables. The boy stood there¹ dazed and frightened, holding the empty tray in his hand. The whistles and catcalls from the customers (the cries of “hey, there go the profits!”... “*Mazeltov!*” ...and “well, *he* didn’t work here very long ... “ which invariably seems to follow the breaking of glass or dishware in a public restaurant) all seemed to confuse him.

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When the owner came to see what the excitement was about, the boy cowered as if he expected to be struck and threw up his arms as if to ward off the blow.

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“All right! All right, you dope,” shouted the owner, “don’t just stand there! Get the broom and sweep that mess up. A broom ... a broom, you idiot! It’s in the kitchen. Sweep up all the pieces.”

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The boy saw that he was not going to be punished. His frightened expression disappeared and he smiled and hummed as he came back with the broom to sweep the floor. A few of the rowdier customers kept up the remarks, amusing themselves at his expense.

“Here, sonny, over here there’s a nice piece behind you ... ”

“C’mon, do it again ... ”

“He’s not so dumb. It’s easier to break ‘em than to wash ‘em ... ”

As his vacant eyes moved across the crowd of amused onlookers, he slowly mirrored their smiles and finally broke into an uncertain grin at the joke which he obviously did not understand.

I felt sick inside as I looked at his dull, vacuous smile, the wide, bright eyes of a child, uncertain but eager to please. They were laughing at him because he was mentally retarded.

And I had been laughing at him too.

Suddenly, I was furious at myself and all those who were smirking at him. I jumped up and shouted, “Shut up! Leave him alone! It’s not his fault he can’t understand! He can’t help what he is! But for God’s sake he’s still a human being!”

The room grew silent. I cursed myself for losing control and creating a scene. I tried not to look at the boy as I paid my check and walked out without touching my food. I felt ashamed for both of us.

How strange it is that people of honest feelings and sensibility, who would not take advantage of a man born without arms or legs or eyes—how such people think nothing of abusing a man born with low intelligence. It infuriated me to think that not too long ago I, like this boy, had foolishly played the clown.

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And I had almost forgotten.

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I'd hidden the picture of the old Charlie Gordon from myself because now that I was intelligent it was something that had to be pushed out of my mind. But today in looking at that boy, for the first time I saw what I had been. *I was just like him!*"

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Only a short time ago, I learned that people laughed at me. Now I can see that unknowingly I joined with them in laughing at myself. That hurts most of all.

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I have often reread my progress reports and seen the illiteracy, the childish naïveté, the mind of low intelligence peering from a dark room, through the keyhole, at the dazzling light outside. I see that even in my dullness I knew that I was inferior, and that other people had something I lacked—something denied me. In my mental blindness, I thought that it was somehow connected with the ability to read and write, and I was sure that if I could get those skills I would automatically have intelligence too.

Even a feeble-minded man wants to be like other men.

A child may not know how to feed itself, or what to eat, yet it knows of hunger.

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This then is what I was like, I never knew. Even with my gift of intellectual awareness, I never really knew.

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This day was good for me. Seeing the past more clearly, I have decided to use my knowledge and skills to work in the field of increasing human intelligence levels. Who is better equipped for this work? Who else has lived in both worlds? These are my people. Let me use my gift to do something for them.

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Tomorrow, I will discuss with Dr. Strauss the manner in which I can work in this area. I may be able to help him work out the problems of widespread use of the technique which was used on me. I have several good ideas of my own.

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There is so much that might be done with this technique. If I could be made into a genius, what about thousands of others like myself? What fantastic levels might be achieved by using this technique on normal people? On *geniuses*?

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There are so many doors to open. I am impatient to begin.

Socratic Seminar
Discussion

Is Charlie better off as a result
of the surgery?

My first thoughts:



Analyze the theme of Demeter’s Prayer to Flowers for Algernon. Discuss the following questions. These questions will come up in a socratic discussion.

How does the speaker’s wish in “Demeter’s Prayer” relate to Charlie’s realization in the May 20 report?	
Does the poem provide a wish or a warning? Explain	
Why do we seek knowledge?	
How can knowledge be positive and negative?	
Is it possible to be intelligent in different ways?	

Select One



*Determine a claim Charlie makes in the report from May 20, and describe how he supports his claim. What reasons does he provide, and how does he transition between them?

Analyze the significance of the incident from the report on May 20: How does this incident reveal Charlie's character and develop a theme?