Benjamin Franklin once said, “He that best understands the world, least likes it,” meaning that once one understands the harsh realities of life, he or she becomes unhappy with the world around. Franklin’s aphorism is not unlike the sayings, “Ignorance is bliss,” and “What you don’t know won’t hurt you,” but Franklin takes the idea further by pointing out that knowledge – rather than lack of knowledge – can be harmful. This theme of the damaging effects of knowledge is common amongst protagonists in literature.

In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass was a relatively content young boy until he learned to read. At first, the reading brought him joy, but once he read *The Columbian Orator*, this joy began to fade. Reading the persuasive speeches about freedom and liberty did not give him the joy he expected. Understanding the arguments of liberty made him understand the cruelty of slavery. He immediately changed from a light-hearted boy to a miserable and gloomy boy. It was at this point he realized he was a slave for life, and he even considered suicide. For Frederick Douglass, understanding the world made him very unhappy.

Understanding the world also made Charlie Gordon, the protagonist from *Flower for Algernon* a very unhappy man. Charlie was a happy, yet mentally handicapped, 32-year-old working at a bakery and attending night school when he underwent an operation to improve his IQ. Although Charlie learned to experience joys he had never had before – such as reading a book, falling in love, writing music – he also learned a terrible lesson about the world around him. As his IQ approached genius levels, he realized the truth of the world around him: professors weren’t as smart as he thought, people were cruel to the mentally handicapped, and his family was unkind. For Charlie, his newfound intelligence came at a cost; he discovered the world was not wonderful.

While Douglass and Charlie Gordon were two very different protagonists, both gained unhappiness as soon as they gained knowledge. Charlie Gordon was a fictional character that returned to his initial ignorant state, but Douglass – a real-life hero – continued to gain knowledge and used his understanding of freedom to change the world around him. Perhaps Franklin, who understood the world very well, was speaking of pioneers such as himself (and Douglass) when he pointed out, “He that best understands the world, least likes it.”