Sample response: The Black Balloon

### The question:

Interactions with others challenge attitudes and beliefs.

To what extent do the texts you have studied in this elective support this view?

In your response, refer to your prescribed text and ONE other related text of your own choosing.

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**Prescribed text:** The Black Balloon directed by Elissa Down (film)

**Related text:** ‘Flowers for Algernon’ by Daniel Keyes (short story)

**Response by:** Imelda Judge

Not all interactions will challenge attitudes and beliefs. Those interactions that have the potential to challenge an individual’s attitudes and beliefs depend upon the level of commitment the individual has to their beliefs; how committed the individual is to the relationships within the relevant social contexts and, of course, the ability to share a common understanding of the language used within that social context. These elements can be seen in the semi-autobiographical ‘teen flick’, Black Balloon, by Elissa Down, and the 1958 short story ‘Flowers for Algernon’ by Daniel Keyes. Both texts reveal the dangers of fixed perspectives that discriminate against individuals who are different and the importance of fostering equity in all interactions.

Our own interactions with the protagonist have significant potential to challenge our fixed attitudes if the composer creates a strong connection between the protagonist and the reader. From the opening of the film The Black Balloon it is apparent that Thomas, the protagonist, is confronted by having to justify his older brother Charlie’s autistic behaviour to new neighbours. Close to the opening scene Charlie’s rhythmic tapping, guttural humming noises and child-like dress and behaviour create concern and intrigue amongst the neighbours. Cuts to and from other neighbours and Charlie capture their disdainful facial expressions. The camera then cuts to the boys on the bike, emphasising the brashness of the youngest boy who offensively taunts Thomas, ‘Why is your brother a spastic? He doesn’t talk and shit’, placing the viewer in an introspective and narrow-minded Australian suburb and foreshadowing what the Mollison family will have to endure here.

Unlike the realism of the film The Black Balloon, the science fiction short story ‘Flowers of Algernon’ tells the fictional narrative of Charlie Gordon, a human test case for two scientists to prove that human intelligence can be artificially enhanced. The narration is focalised through Charlie Gordon in a series of ‘progris reports’ for ‘scientific purposes’, showing Charlie’s...
Poor spelling in the text is explained as part of the ideas.

A few examples are given to build up the topic.

The more critical the relationship is to the individual, within the social context, the more likely the individual will be challenged in their attitudes and beliefs. In the breakfast scene where Charlie breaks the egg and smears it into the floor, the right side of the frame is busy with activity and both Charlie and Simon Mollison repeatedly interrupt the centre of the frame creating a barrier around Thomas, quietly sitting to the far left, while his mother on the far right of the frame is busy with food and medicine preparation for Charlie. The dining table and the kitchen counter create more visual boundaries to show the daily isolation Thomas feels. His brief attempt to get his mother’s attention by requesting the milk is disrupted by Charlie’s dropping of the egg carton. The ensuing noise is in contrast to the mostly silent Thomas. It is not until Thomas develops a romantic relationship with Jackie Masters that he starts to be able to accept his brother’s diagnosis and realise that the only person who can change in the relationship is himself. This change in attitude is apparent in the bath scene near the closing of the film where Thomas and Charlie are captured in a twin shot. The removal of physical boundaries is evident in the visual metaphor of the bath, reinforced by the childish language Thomas uses to communicate with his brother. The honest disclosure, ‘I hated being your brother’, is followed by comic relief to reduce the tension, ‘You just pissed on my leg didn’t you?’ This scene shows the significant impact that Jackie has had on Thomas so that he is now able to value his relationship with his brother.

Alternatively, in ‘Flowers for Algernon’, individual characters or whole groups are confronted by the enhanced intelligence of Charlie Gordon. What becomes obvious here is that interactions may challenge an individual but this doesn’t necessarily lead to a permanent change in their attitudes. The emerging difference between Charlie and his workmates, Joe Carp and Frank Reilly, resulted in evasive statements to avoid social interaction from them later in the narrative, in stark contrast to earlier interactions where they actively initiated contact with him to make a spectacle of his weak intelligence. Charlie’s analysis of the later interaction shows his emerging social awareness, ‘I guess it will take a little time for them to get used to the changes in me. Everybody seems frightened of me.’ What Keyes exposes, through the character of Charlie, is the fixed perspectives social groups can have about those with limited intelligence and how threatened they can feel when those who are disempowered become empowered. Keyes reminds the audience of the importance of treating everyone with respect regardless of their intellectual capacity.
Conclusion sums up ideas in both texts in relation to the question. It is through interactions with others that we can be exposed to other ideas, values and attitudes that challenge our own. These interactions can be relationships we experience in the real world or in the world of creative fiction. If we value the relationships formed within the social context of the interaction we will be challenged and compelled to change. After studying these two texts one is definitely challenged to develop greater empathy for others who may be different and therefore marginalised.