

## "Charles" (1948) by Shirley Jackson

Note: be sure to know all the underlined vocabulary words for our end of unit vocabulary test. You must provide the definitions yourself; you may be called upon in class to provide a definition.

The day Laurie started kindergarten, he renounced corduroy overalls with bibs and began wearing blue jeans with a belt; I watched him go off the first morning with the older girl next door, seeing  
5 clearly that an era of my life was ended, my sweet-voiced nursery-school tot replaced by a long-trousered, swaggering character who forgot to stop at the corner and wave goodbye to me.

He came home the same way, the front door W  
10 Chords slamming open, his cap on the floor, and the voice suddenly become **raucous** shouting, "Isn't anybody here?"

At lunch he spoke insolently to his father, spilled Jannie's milk, and remarked that his teacher  
15 said we were not to take the Lord's name in vain.

"How was school today?" I asked.

"All right," he said.

"Did you learn anything?" his father asked.

Laurie regarded his father coldly. "I didn't learn  
20 nothing," he said.

"Anything," I said. "Didn't learn anything." "The teacher spanked a boy, though," Laurie said, addressing his bread and butter. "For being fresh," he added with his mouth full.

25 "What did he do?" I asked. "Who was it?" Laurie thought. "It was Charles," he said. "He was fresh. The teacher spanked him and made him stand in a corner. He was awfully fresh."

"What did he do?" I asked again, but Laurie slid  
30 off his chair, took a cookie, and left, while his father was still saying, "See here, young man."

The next day Laurie remarked at lunch, as soon as he sat down, "Well, Charles was bad again today." He grinned enormously and said, "Today Charles hit  
35 the teacher."

"Good heavens," I said, mindful of the Lord's name, "I suppose he got spanked again?"

"He sure did," Laurie said. "Look up," he said to his father.

40 "What?" his father said, looking up.

"Look down," Laurie said. "Look at my thumb. Gee, you're dumb." He began to laugh insanely.

"Why did Charles hit the teacher?" I asked.

"Because she tried to make him color with red  
45 crayons," Laurie said. "Charles wanted to color with green crayons, so he hit the teacher, and she spanked him and said nobody play with Charles, but everybody did."

The third day—it was Wednesday of the first  
50 week—Charles bounced a seesaw onto the head of a little girl and made her bleed and the teacher made him stay inside all during recess Thursday Charles had to stand in a corner during story time because he kept pounding his feet on the floor. Friday Charles  
55 was deprived of blackboard privileges because he threw chalk.

On Saturday I remarked to my husband, "Do you think kindergarten is too unsettling for Laurie? All this toughness and bad grammar and this Charles  
60 boy sounds like such a bad influence."

"It'll be all right," my husband said reassuringly. "Bound to be people like Charles in the world. Might as well meet them now as later."

On Monday Laurie came home late, full of  
65 news. "Charles," he shouted as he came up the hill; I was waiting anxiously on the front steps, "Charles," Laurie yelled, "Charles was bad again."

"Come right in," I said, as soon as he came close enough. "Lunch is waiting."

70 "You know what Charles did?" he demanded, following me through the door. "Charles yelled so in school they sent a boy in from first grade to tell the teacher she had to make Charles keep quiet, and so Charles had to stay after school. And so, all the  
75 children stayed to watch him."

"What did he do?" I asked.

"He just sat there," Laurie said, climbing into his chair at the table. "Hi Pop, y'old dust mop."

80 "Charles had to stay after school today," I told my husband. "Everyone stayed with him."

"What does this Charles look like?" my husband asked Laurie. "What's his other name?"

85 "He's bigger than me," Laurie said. "And he doesn't have any rubbers and he doesn't even wear a jacket."

Monday night was the first Parent-Teachers meeting, and only the fact that Jannie had a cold kept me from going; I wanted passionately to meet Charles's mother. On Tuesday Laurie remarked  
90 suddenly, "Our teacher had a friend come see her in school today."

"Charles's mother?" my husband and I asked simultaneously.

95 "Naaah Laurie said scornfully. "It was a man came and made us do exercises. Look." He climbed down from his chair and squatted down and touched his toes. "Like this," he said. He got solemnly back into his chair and said, picking up his fork, "Charles didn't even do exercises."

100 "That's fine," I said heartily. "Didn't Charles want to do exercises?"

“Naaah,” Laurie said. “Charles was so fresh to the teacher’s friend he wasn’t let do exercises.”  
“Fresh again?” I said.  
105 “He kicked the teacher’s friend,” Laurie said. “The teacher’s friend told Charles to touch his toes like I just did and Charles kicked him.”  
“What are they going to do about Charles, do you suppose?” Laurie’s father asked him.  
110 Laurie shrugged elaborately. “Throw him out of school, I guess,” he said.  
Wednesday and Thursday were routine; Charles yelled during story hour and hit a boy in the stomach and made him cry. On Friday Charles stayed  
115 after school again and so did all the other children.  
With the third week of kindergarten Charles was an institution in our family; Jannie was being a Charles when she cried all afternoon; Laurie did a Charles when he filled his wagon full of mud and  
120 pulled it through the kitchen; even my husband, when he caught his elbow in the telephone cord and pulled telephone, ash tray, and a bowl of flowers off the table, said, “Looks like Charles.”  
During the third and fourth weeks, there  
125 seemed to be a reformation in Charles; Laurie reported grimly at lunch on Thursday of the third week, “Charles was so good today the teacher gave him an apple.”  
“What?” I said, and my husband added warily,  
130 “You mean Charles?”  
“Charles,” Laurie said. “He gave the crayons around and he picked up the books afterward and the teacher said he was her helper.”  
“What happened?” I asked incredulously. “He was her helper, that’s all,” Laurie said, and shrugged.  
135 “Can this be true, about Charles?” I asked my husband that night. “Can something like this happen?”  
“Wait and see,” my husband said cynically.  
140 “When you’ve got a Charles to deal with, this may mean he’s only plotting.”  
He seemed to be wrong. For over a week Charles was the teacher’s helper; each day he handed things out and he picked things up; no one  
145 had to stay after school.  
“The PTA meeting’s next week again,” I told my husband one evening. “I’m going to find Charles’s mother there.”  
“Ask her what happened to Charles,” my  
150 husband said. “I’d like to know”  
“I’d like to know myself,” I said.  
On Friday of that week things were back to normal. “You know what Charles did today?” Laurie demanded at the lunch table, in a voice slightly

155 awed. “He told a little girl to say a word and she said it and the teacher washed her mouth out with soap and Charles laughed.”  
“What word?” his father asked unwisely, and Laurie said, “I’ll have to whisper it to you, it’s so bad.”  
160 He got down off his chair and went around to his father. His father bent his head down and Laurie - whispered joyfully. His father’s eyes widened.  
“Did Charles tell the little girl to say *that*?” he asked respectfully.  
165 “She said it twice” Laurie said. “Charles told her to say it twice.”  
“What happened to Charles?” my husband asked.  
“Nothing,” Laurie said. “He was passing out the  
170 crayons.”  
Monday morning Charles abandoned the little girl and said the evil word himself three or four times, getting his mouth washed out with soap each time. He also threw chalk.  
175 My husband came to the door -with me that evening as I set out for the PTA meeting. “Invite her over for a cup of tea after the meeting ’ he said. “I want to get a look at her.”  
“If only she’s there,” I said prayerfully. “She’ll  
180 be there,” my husband said. “I don’t see how they could hold a PTA meeting without Charles’s mother.”  
At the meeting I sat restlessly, scanning each comfortable matronly face, trying to determine which one hid the secret of Charles. None of them  
185 looked to me haggard enough. No one stood up in the meeting and apologized for the way her son had been acting. No one mentioned Charles.  
After the meeting, I identified and sought out Laurie’s kindergarten teacher. She had a plate with a cup of tea and chocolate cake; I had a plate with a cup of tea and marshmallow cake. We maneuvered  
190 up to one another cautiously and smiled.  
“I’ve been so anxious to meet you,” I said. “I’m Laurie’s mother.”  
195 “We’re all so interested in Laurie,” she said.  
“Well, he certainly likes kindergarten,” I said. “He talks about it all the time.”  
“We had a little trouble adjusting, the first week or so,” she said primly, “but now he’s a fine  
200 little helper. With lapses, of course.”  
“Laurie usually adjusts very quickly,” I said. “I suppose this time it’s Charles’s influence.”  
“Charles?”  
“Yes,” I said, laughing, “you must have you  
205 hands full in that kindergarten, with Charles.”  
“Charles?” she said. “We don’t have any Charles in the kindergarten.”

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Playground. P. J. Crook. Acrylic on canvas, 116.8 x 132 cm. Private Collection.



Answer the following questions before class and be prepared to discuss your answers. Note that further vocabulary is included in these questions and should be part of your vocabulary list.

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**1. The perspective of this story can best be described as which of the following?**

- A. Third person limited
- B. Third person objective
- C. Second person
- D. First person

**2. The purpose of the first paragraph can best be described as**

- A. to demonstrate to the reader a transformation in the character of Laurie from a past, to which the reader is not privy.
- B. to foreshadow the events of the narrative by showing Laurie's proclivity to be influenced
- C. to exposit the scene of the story and the archetypes of each primary character
- D. to establish the reliability of the narrator and their particular perspective

**3. Lines 57 through 63 can best be described as**

- E. irony
- F. foreshadowing
- G. personification
- H. hyperbole

**4. Given the passage as a whole, line 110 through 111 implies what about Laurie.**

- A. That he thinks Charles should be kicked out of school because he is such a troublemaker.
- B. That he likes Charles but does not want his parents to know because Charles is a bad influence.
- C. That he is unaware of the gravity of Charles' behavior and cannot see that it might have serious consequences.
- D. That he is scheming to be kicked out of school because he does not like kindergarten.

**5. As used in lines 117, the word institution means**

- A. A well-established feature
- B. A regularized practice
- C. A social custom
- D. An official organization

**6. The point of the paragraph from lines 116 through 123 can best be described as**

- A. Demonstrate through montage how central the daily news of Charles has become to the family through the denominalization of Charles.
- B. Demonstrate how naughty Charles is through a montage of his mischievous actions
- C. To show through a montage of troublesome acts how the influence of Charles has spread beyond just Laurie and into the whole family.
- D. To characterize Charles through a montage of events wherein the narrator shows how members of the family act like Charles.

**7. All of the following are clues about the nature of Charles except which of the following.**

- A. Lines 32 through 35
- B. Lines 94 through 103
- C. Lines 112 through 115
- D. Lines 182 through 187

**8. What about the perspective of this story colors our experience of the narrative's unfolding?**

- A. It is a reliable narrator who gives us all pertinent details of the story.
- B. It is a reliable narrator who gives us as much information as they know
- C. It is an unreliable narrator who does not understand the situation in which they are
- D. It is an unreliable narrator who knowingly misconstrues the information they communicate

**9. Looking at the work "Playground" by P.J. Crook, the mood of the scene could best be described as?**

- A. Exuberantly cheerful
- B. Placidly idyllic
- C. Eerily indifferent
- D. Jovially candid

**10. Which of the following elements from the work of art contributes to this mood?**

- A. The games the children are playing
- B. The faces of the children
- C. The lighting and colors of the painting
- D. The flat perspective of the painting

**Vocabulary List:**

archetype  
candid  
cynical  
denominalization  
deprive  
exposit  
exuberant  
haggard  
hyperbole  
idyllic  
incredulous  
indifferent  
insolent  
institution  
jovial  
lapse  
matronly  
misconstrue  
montage  
personification  
placid  
privy  
proclivity  
reformation  
renounce  
simultaneous  
warily