

Charles

by Shirley Jackson

Content Synopsis

The story begins as a first-person narrator says that her five-year-old son, Laurie, is getting ready to head off to kindergarten. The mother remains unnamed throughout the story when it is presented as fiction in 1948 and 1949, but is understood to be Jackson when the story appears as part of her 1953 memoir, *Life among the Savages*. She laments that “an era of my life was ended” as the child saunters down the street with an older neighborhood child. When Laurie returns home for lunch, he barges in with a loud voice and rambunctious behavior. Within minutes at the lunch table, he misbehaves in three ways. His mother, acting as if nothing is wrong, asks about his day at school, and his father inquires about his lessons. He responds rudely and introduces the topic of a boy, Charles, who got in trouble. Laurie’s parents inquire about Charles’s behavior without noting Laurie’s own problematic actions. Over the next few days, Laurie regales his parents with tales of Charles’s antics. Charles strikes the teacher, injures another child, interrupts class, and throws things. His teacher disciplines him through spankings, public shaming, and loss of privileges. Laurie’s parents, in the meantime, gobble up the tales of a child who is worse than theirs, eagerly inquiring, not about their own son’s school day, but about Charles’ day when Laurie comes home. Even when Laurie comes home late once day, the mother accepts his story that “all the children stayed to watch” Charles when he has been kept after school for shouting so loudly that other classrooms were disturbed.

The first set of parent-teacher conferences pass by with the mother using her baby’s cold as an excuse to not attend. She claims disappointment in missing out on the chance to meet Charles’s mother but does not seem concerned about not having the chance to talk with Laurie’s teacher.

Laurie’s mother serves as a particularly enthusiastic audience as Laurie continues to tell his parents about Charles’s exploits. His father, on the other hand, seems a bit more reserved in his acceptance of Charles, often asking questions that suggest he may have doubts about the other child. This reservation does not last, however, and both parents are soon back to gobbling up Charles stories, making him an “institution in our family,” to the extent that “the baby was being a Charles when she cried all afternoon; Laurie did a Charles when he filled his wagon full of mud and pulled it through the kitchen; even my husband, when he caught his elbow in the telephone cord and pulled telephone, ashtray, and a bowl of flowers off the table.”

Both parents, however, are surprised and a bit hesitant a few weeks into the school year when Charles seems to start behaving differently after the teacher encourages him to become a helper. Laurie, in contrast, is blasé about the change. He simply notes, “He was her helper, that’s all.” Charles does not disappoint for long, as he goes back to terrorizing the kindergarten classroom within a few days. His new adventures include getting another child to use inappropriate language, using it himself, throwing more chalk, and being disciplined again.

This alteration in Charles is an extra draw for the mother as the second set of parent-teacher conferences approaches. While the mother prepares to leave, the father suggests asking Charles’s mother over, so he can meet this paragon. The story ends when Laurie’s teacher says, “We’re all so interested in Laurie” and explains that although he had some problems the first few weeks of school, he has adjusted and is helpful—for the most part. Laurie’s mother obliviously supposes aloud that although Laurie adapts quickly, his bad behavior might be due to Charles’s bad influence. She commiserates with the teacher for having to handle Charles in class. The story ends with the teacher’s bewilderment at the mother’s assumptions. “Charles?” the teacher says. “We don’t have any Charles in the kindergarten.”

Symbols & Motifs

The story’s use of foreshadowing cleverly leads up to the closing irony. A careful reading reveals how Laurie’s daily behavior echoes Charles’s actions at school. For example, the first day of school he leaves his mother behind, and when he returns home, he slams the door, drops his hat on the floor and shouts. His misbehavior continues at lunch when he “spoke insolently to his father, spilled his baby sister’s milk, and remarked that his teacher said we were not to take the name of the Lord in vain.” In addition, he uses poor grammar on purpose and tells his parents that Charles was spanked “for being fresh.” After Laurie’s second day of school, he mirrors Charles’s misbehavior with additional verbal disrespect of his father. Laurie’s actions at home are not described for the following days, but on the weekend, the mother asks her husband, “Do you think kindergarten is too unsettling for Laurie? All this toughness, and bad grammar, and this Charles boy sounds like such a bad influence.” The mother’s concern is not unfounded as Laurie’s behavior continues to escalate. Among the most obvious instances is when Laurie comes home from school late, claiming the whole class stayed because Charles was held after class. Such hints suggest that Laurie’s own behavior at home is an extension of his behavior at school.

The foreshadowing in the story leads to the ironic ending. The parents' eager anticipation of Charles's antics feed Laurie's tales, and their desire to find a parent doing a worse job than they are is obvious in their gleeful expectation that the mother of a child like Charles would be "haggard" and apologetic. Laurie's mother assumes that "Charles's influence" has inspired Laurie's own inability to handle the changes in his life. The teacher reveals that there are no students named Charles in her class, confirming that just as Laurie has fabricated Charles as his alter ego, his parents have inadvertently projected Charles's mother as theirs.

Historical Context

"Charles" was first printed in the July 1948 issue of *Mademoiselle*. In 1949, it was included in *The Lottery, or The Adventures of James Harris*, later published as *The Lottery and Other Stories*. In 1953, "Charles" became part of the first chapter of Jackson's 1953 memoir, *Life among the Savages*. In addition to appearing in these original publications, "Charles" is one of Jackson's most anthologized stories.

One of the strongest historical aspects of the story is seen in Laurie's descriptions of the way his teacher supposedly handles Charles. The use of corporal punishment is abundant. On Laurie's first day, he says Charles was both "spanked" and sent to a corner. On his second day, Charles hits the teacher and Laurie's mother says, "I suppose he got spanked again?" Laurie assures his parents that Charles was not only spanked, but the teacher "said nobody play with Charles." In the following days, the punishments included being kept "inside all during recess" after injuring another child, being put in the corner again, losing classroom privileges, staying after school, being kept from participation in class activities, and both Charles and a fellow student getting their mouths washed out with soap.

The use of corporal punishment is not surprising considering the expectations of teachers during the time period. Historian Jacob Middleton states that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "corporal punishment was a valued part of the educational process. The use of punishment in the 'school economy' was intended as positive, to 'aim at helping the backslider to do willingly what he ought to do.'" Teachers did not always resort to corporal punishment, however. A few avoided such punishment altogether. They attempted other disciplinary techniques because administration officials were often more concerned with the potential negative effects on the operation of the school. Other options were also needed when students became injured to corporal punishment.

In the case of Jackson's story, Laurie's teacher could be seen as attempting to move away from punishment during the periods when Laurie says that she made Charles a helper. Providing Charles with a positive connection seemed to work, at least in the short term: "For over a week Charles was the teacher's helper; each day he handed things out and he picked things up; no one had to stay after school." The teacher affirms that this change was

effective—for Laurie—saying, "We had a little trouble adjusting, the first week or so . . . but now he's a fine little helper. With occasional lapses, of course."

Further, Laurie's parents do not react negatively to the punishments that Charles receives at school. Though this might be based on the fact that they did not acknowledge Charles as an extension of their own son, Middleton's research suggests that parents often left the school discipline in the teacher's hands. Ironically, however, Laurie's parents do not resort to any kind of discipline when he misbehaves. Rather, Laurie's mother seems to ignore her son's bad behavior at home, only seeming concerned when she changes the topic to keep her husband from becoming irritated at Laurie for acting out.

Societal Context

The main social context of the story can be seen in the role of the mother in the story. She serves as a guardian at the beginning of the story, watching her child leave her and knowing that "an era of my life was ended." When Laurie returns from school, she serves as both the nurturer, providing food and encouraging discussion, and the mediator, interrupting her husband or son before her husband can fully respond to Laurie's misdeeds. For instance, at lunch the second day, she "asked [Laurie] quickly" why Charles had behaved badly after Laurie disrespects his father. When the first parent-teacher meeting occurs, she fills the role of nurturing parent. Despite the fact that her husband seems perfectly capable of interacting with the children, no one attends the meeting because "the fact that the baby had a cold kept [her] from going." She further fills the social contract of the mother being the one to take care of issues with the children when she attends the second meeting alone. There is no suggestion that her husband would go with her; in fact, he merely escorts her to the door with the instruction that his wife should "Invite [Charles' mother] over for a cup of tea after the meeting. . . . I want to get a look at her."

The mother's expectation for meeting Charles's mother at the PTA meeting reveals a sense of social insecurity, a need for reassurance that one is not alone. The daily care of her own children has clearly worn on the narrator of the story, so she "wanted passionately to meet Charles's mother" and immediately believes that Laurie's teacher might have invited the other woman into the classroom when Laurie mentions that a guest came to the classroom. During the PTA meeting, the narrator sits "restlessly, scanning each comfortable matronly face" in her effort to find Charles's mother.

Religious Context

Early in the story, Laurie reveals that his teacher has "said we were not to take the name of the Lord in vain." The narrator reinforces the concern over this situation when on the second day, she corrects her own language, saying "Good heavens" because she is trying to be "mindful of the Lord's name." Though the

family does not appear religious and no religious messages are offered in the story, these brief pieces of dialogue suggest the religious atmosphere of the time period.

Scientific and Technological Context

“Charles” does not have a specific scientific or technological context.

Biographical Context

Shirley Hardie Jackson was born on December 14, 1916, in San Francisco, to Geraldine Bugbee Jackson and Leslie Jackson. Most biographers point out that she was not the daughter that her mother wanted; rather than being attractive and simple minded, she was smart and plain. She met Stanley Hyman in 1938 while they were both students at Syracuse University and married him on June 3, 1940. The two moved to New York, where she began to publish her work while her husband worked as an editor. Their first child, Laurence, or Laurie, was born in 1942, and she soon cultivated an ongoing relationship with *The New Yorker*. Her first novel, *The Road through the Wall*, published in 1948, touches on some of her own life experiences while also introducing some of the gothic literary elements for which she would primarily become known.

Published in 1953, *Life among the Savages* is Jackson’s first collection of family stories. In a huge variation from her novels, *Life* is primarily lighthearted, fitting what critic Lenemaja Friedman calls “the humorous helplessness of parents in the inevitable crises of family living.” *Life among the Savages* covers a time period from approximately 1945 when Jackson and Hyman moved from New York to North Bennington, Vermont, until 1951, shortly after their youngest son Barry’s birth. Laurie was three years old, Joanne (also known as Jannie) was born in the same year they moved, and Sarah (also known as Sally) came along in 1948. The story “Charles” appears about a fourth of the way into the first chapter of the book. Despite the fact that it had been published as fiction when submitted to *Mademoiselle* in 1948, the story’s inclusion in Jackson’s memoir suggests that there are some realistic elements to the tale.

The collection reveals much about Jackson’s family life. Biographer Judy Oppenheimer notes that one of the most honest aspects of the book is the way Jackson’s “first three children emerged in full color on the page, their separate personalities amazingly real and convincing—Laurie the independent, Joanne the romantic dreamer, Sally the wildly imaginative.” That trait of Laurie’s is especially clear in this story, noted as early as the first paragraph with the mother’s note:

The day my son 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 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 good-bye to me.

Friedman notes that Jackson “does not hesitate to poke fun at either her husband or herself, and both at times appear ridiculous and vulnerable when confronted with family problems” while the children “are ingenious and yet, in their adventures, typical of the children of ordinary families, although one cannot regard the Hymans as an ordinary family.”

Complementary Works

- **“The Story of an Hour” by Kate Chopin.** Chopin’s 1894 short story follows a woman in the hours following the news that her husband has been killed in a train accident. Though her family comes to comfort her, she retreats to her room to come to terms with the loss. Chopin’s surprise ending connects with Jackson’s use of irony at the end of “Charles.”
- **“A Good Man is Hard to Find” by Flannery O’Connor.** O’Connor’s 1953 story follows a family of five and their grandmother as the family goes on a trip. June Star and John Wesley, the children of the family, misbehave in ways that are reminiscent of Charles, while the parents primarily ignore the obnoxious actions. The story ends with an ironic twist when a criminal figure the grandmother has focused on intercepts the family after a car accident.
- **Life among the Savages by Shirley Jackson.** “Charles” is incorporated into the first chapter of Jackson’s memoir of her family life from 1945 to 1951.
- **Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life by Ruth Franklin.** Franklin’s biography of Shirley Jackson delves into the writer’s major works as well as her life, including her years in Vermont and her memoir *Life among the Savages*. The focus on Jackson as a woman writer who challenged expectations of her time period brings her back to life as both a person and a literary genius.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the first-person narration from the mother’s point of view affect the tone of the story?
2. Laurie’s behavior is clearly problematic throughout the story. In what ways do the parents overlook his potential influence on or connection to Charles?
3. How might parents view the teacher’s responses to Charles’s actions in today’s world? How does this contrast with the way Laurie’s parents respond?
4. Discuss the ways this story might be considered universally relevant.
5. Compare and contrast the mother’s attitudes toward Charles with the father’s attitudes. Consider each parent’s role in the family hierarchy in your answer.
6. What are some instances of foreshadowing in the story? Were you surprised by the ending?

7. What were some of the traditional social roles that men and women were expected to conform to during the 1940s? In what ways do Laurie's parents conform to or depart from these roles?
8. Jackson's family stories are lighter in tone than her novels or short stories like "The Lottery." Discuss the ways stories like "Charles" give readers insight into the author as a person.
9. Discuss the way the tension increases as the days pass from Laurie's first day of school to his mother's first meeting with his teacher.
10. Since this story was originally published as fiction, there may be questions about the veracity of the events. Do any elements of the story seem more like fiction than nonfiction? Discuss the potential problems of presenting the story as both fiction and memoir.

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Theresa L. Stowell

Essay Ideas

1. Analyze the use of foreshadowing in the story. How does foreshadowing connect to the irony at the end of the story?
2. Analyze how Jackson effectively uses irony to illustrate family relationships in "The Lottery" and "Charles."
3. This story is part of Jackson's longer memoir *Life among the Savages*. Read the memoir and discuss the significance of this story in this period of Jackson's own life. What does "Charles" reveal about Jackson's parenting style?
4. Compare and contrast the sections about Jackson's early years in Vermont in Judy Oppenheimer's *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson* with those in Ruth Franklin's *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life*. How do these authors' portrayals of Jackson compare to Jackson's portrayal of herself in "Charles"?
5. Shirley Jackson uses irony to make readers think about the ways family members interact with each other. Choose at least one short story from Kate Chopin and one from Flannery O'Connor and discuss the effectiveness of these writers' use of irony to reveal something about family interactions.

Works Cited

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