

Close Reading in the Classroom

“House Taken Over”

By Julio Cortázar

“House Taken Over”

Julio Cortázar

Perform a close reading of the short story below. Remember the steps for reading closely:

- Circle and define any unknown words in the left margin.
- Highlight in yellow any passages necessary for understanding the plot.
- Note in the right margin any important details that are revealed.
- Highlight in orange any passages necessary for interpreting the text.

We liked the house because, apart from its being old and spacious (in a day when old houses go down for a profitable auction of their construction materials), it kept the memories of great-grandparents, our paternal grandfather, our parents and the whole of childhood.

Irene and I got used to staying in the house by ourselves, which was crazy; eight people could have lived in that place and not have gotten in each other's way. We rose at seven in the morning and got the cleaning done, and about eleven I left Irene to finish off whatever rooms and went to the kitchen. We lunched at noon precisely; then there was nothing left to do but a few dirty plates. It was pleasant to take lunch and commune with the great hollow, silent house, and it was enough for us just to keep it clean. We ended up thinking, at times, that that was what had kept us from marrying. Irene turned down two suitors for no particular reason, and Maria Esther went and died on me before we could manage to get engaged. We were easing into our forties with the unvoiced concept that the quiet, simple marriage of sister and brother was the indispensable end to a line established in this house by our grandparents. We would die here someday, obscure and distant cousins would inherit the place, have it torn down, sell the bricks and get rich on the building plot; or more justly and better yet, we would topple it ourselves before it was too late.

Irene never bothered anyone. Once the morning housework was finished, she spent the rest of the day on the sofa in her bedroom, knitting. I couldn't tell you why she knitted so much; I think women knit when they discover that it's a fat excuse to do nothing at all. But Irene was not like that; she always knitted necessities, sweaters for winter, socks for me, handy morning robes and bed jackets for herself. Sometimes she would do a jacket, then unravel it the next moment because there was something that didn't please her; it was pleasant to see a pile of tangled wool in her knitting basket fighting a losing battle for a few hours to retain its shape. Saturdays I went downtown to buy wool; Irene had faith in my good taste, was pleased with the colors and never a skein had to be returned. I took advantage of these trips to make the rounds of the bookstores, uselessly asking if they had anything new in French literature. Nothing worthwhile had arrived in Argentina since 1939.

But it's the house I want to talk about, the house and Irene; I'm not very important. I wonder what Irene would have done without her knitting. One can reread a book, but once a pullover is finished you can't do it over again, it's some kind of disgrace. One day I found that the drawer at the bottom of the chiffonier, replete with mothballs, was filled with shawls, white, green, lilac. Stacked amid a great smell of camphor--it was like a shop; I didn't have the nerve to ask her what she planned to do with them. We didn't have to earn our living, there was plenty coming in from the farms each month, even piling up. But Irene was only interested in the knitting and showed a wonderful

dexterity, and for me the hours slipped away watching her, her hands like silver sea-urchins, needles flashing, and one or two knitting baskets on the floor, the balls of yarn jumping about. It was lovely.

How not to remember the layout of that house. The dining room, a living room with tapestries, the library, and three large bedrooms in the section most recessed the one that faced toward Rodriguez Pena. Only a corridor with its massive oak door separated that part from the front wing, where there was a bath, the kitchen, our bedrooms and the hall. One entered the house through a vestibule with enameled tiles, and a wrought-iron gated door opened onto the living room. You had to come in through the vestibule and open the gate to go into the living room; the doors to our bedrooms were on either side of this, and opposite was the corridor leading to the back section; going down the passage, one swung open the oak door beyond which was the other part of the house; or just before the door, one could turn to the left and go down a narrower passageway which led to the kitchen and the bath. When the door was open, you became aware of the size of the house; when it was closed, you had the impression of an apartment, like the ones they build today, with barely enough room to move around in. Irene and I always lived in this part of the house and hardly ever went beyond the oak door except to do the cleaning. Incredible how much dust collected on the furniture. It may be Buenos Aires is a clean city, but she owes it to her population and nothing else. There's too much dust in the air, the slightest breeze and it's back on the marble console tops and in the diamond patterns of the tooled-leather desk set. It's a lot of work to get it off with a feather duster; the motes rise and hang in the air, and settle again a minute later on the pianos and the furniture.

I'll always have a clear memory of it because it happened so simply and without fuss. Irene was knitting in her bedroom, it was eight at night, and I suddenly decided to put the water up for mate. I went down the corridor as far as the oak door, which was ajar, then turned into the hall toward the kitchen, when I heard something in the library or the dining room. The sound came through muted and indistinct, a chair being knocked over onto the carpet or the muffled buzzing of a conversation. At the same time, or a second later, I heard it at the end of the passage which led from those two rooms toward the door. I hurled myself against the door before it was too late and shut it, leaned on it with the weight of my body; luckily, the key was on our side; moreover, I ran the great bolt into place, just to be safe.

I went down to the kitchen, heated the kettle, and when I got back with the tray of mate, I told Irene:

"I had to shut the door to the passage. They've taken over the back part."

She let her knitting fall and looked at me with her tired, serious eyes.

"You're sure?"

I nodded.

"In that case," she said, picking up her knitting again, "we'll have to live on this side."

I sipped at the mate very carefully, but she took her time starting her work again. I remember it was a gray vest she was knitting. I liked that vest.

Political
the
was
exiled
after
political
takeover
Symbolism

The first few days were painful, since we'd both left so many things in the part that had been taken over. My collection of French literature, for example, was still in the library. Irene had left several folios of stationery and a pair of slippers that she used a lot in the winter. I missed my briar pipe, and Irene, I think, regretted the loss of an ancient bottle of Hesperidins. It happened repeatedly (but only in the first few days) that we would close some drawer or cabinet and look at one another sadly.

Medication
Natural
Extract
to increase
circulation

not
meds
for
mental
illness

"It's not here."

One thing more among the many lost on the other side of the house.

But there were advantages, too. The cleaning was so much simplified that, even when we got up late, nine-thirty for instance, by eleven we were sitting around with our arms folded. Irene got into the habit of coming to the kitchen with me to help get lunch. We thought about it and decided on this: while I prepared the lunch, Irene would cook up dishes that could be eaten cold in the evening. We were happy with the arrangement because it was always such a bother to have to leave our bedrooms in the evening and start to cook. Now we made do with the table in Irene's room and platters of cold supper.

Since it left her more time for knitting, Irene was content. I was a little lost without my books, but so as not to inflict myself on my sister, I set about reordering papa's stamp collection; that killed some time. We amused ourselves sufficiently, each with his own thing, almost always getting together in Irene's bedroom, which was the more comfort-able. Every once in a while, Irene might say:

"Look at this pattern I just figured out, doesn't it look like clover?"

After a bit it was I, pushing a small square of paper in front of her so that she could see the excellence of some stamp or another from Eupen-et-Malmedy. We were fine, and little by little we stopped thinking. You can live without thinking.

(Whenever Irene talked in her sleep, I woke up immediately and stayed awake. I never could get used to this voice from a statue or a parrot, a voice that came out of the dreams, not from a throat. Irene said that in my sleep I flailed about erroneously and shook the blankets off. We had the living room between us, but at night you could hear everything in the house. We heard each other breathing, coughing, could even feel each other reaching for the light switch when, as happened frequently, neither of us could fall asleep.

Aside from our nocturnal rumblings, everything was quiet in the house. During the day there were the household sounds, the metallic click of knitting needles, the rustle of stamp-album pages turning. The oak door was massive, I think I said that. In the kitchen or the bath, which adjoined the part that was taken over, we managed to talk loudly, or Irene sang lullabies. In a kitchen there's always too much noise, the plates and glasses, for there to be interruptions from other sounds. We seldom allowed ourselves silence there, but when we went back to our rooms or to the living room, then the house grew quiet, half-lit, we ended by stepping around more slowly so as not to disturb one another. I think it was because of this that I woke up irremediably and at once when Irene began to talk in her sleep.)

Except for the consequences, it's nearly a matter of repeating the same scene over again. I was thirsty that night, and before we went to sleep, I told Irene that I was going to

the kitchen for a glass of water. From the door of the bedroom (she was knitting) I heard the noise in the kitchen; if not the kitchen, then the bath, the passage off at that angle dulled the sound. Irene noticed how brusquely I had paused, and came up beside me without a word. We stood listening to the noises, growing more and more sure that they were on our side of the oak door, if not the kitchen then the bath, or in the hall itself at the turn, almost next to us.

We didn't wait to look at one another. I took Irene's arm and forced her to run with me to the wrought-iron door, not waiting to look back. You could hear the noises, still muffled but louder, just behind us. I slammed the grating and we stopped in the vestibule. Now there was nothing to be heard.

"They've taken over our section," Irene said. The knitting had reeled off from her hands and the yarn ran back toward the door and disappeared under it. When she saw that the balls of yarn were on the other side, she dropped the knitting without looking at it.

"Did you have time to bring anything?" I asked hopelessly.

"No, Nothing."

We had what we had on. I remembered fifteen thousand pesos in the wardrobe in my bedroom. Too late now.

I still had my wristwatch on and saw that it was 11 P.M. I took Irene around the waist (I think she was crying) and that was how we went into the street. Before we left, I felt terrible; I locked the front door up tight and tossed the key down the sewer. It wouldn't do to have some poor devil decide to go in and rob the house, at that hour and with the house taken over.

Translated by Paul Blackburn

Guided Reading: “House Taken Over” Questions

Complete the guided reading to gain a deeper understanding of the text.

Comprehension Questions

1. How does the speaker describe the house?
2. What is daily life like at the house?
3. What is Irene's hobby?
4. What surprising event happens midway through the story?
5. What happens at the end?

Analysis Questions

6. What can you infer about the family from the descriptions of the house in first two paragraphs?
7. What is the relationship like between the main characters? How might the daily life at the house contribute to their relationship?
8. What did the brother mean when he said he “didn't have the heart” to ask Irene what she planned to do with the sweaters? What does this suggest about how he feels about her hobby?
9. Describe Irene's reaction to the “take over” midway through the text. How does this alter how you interpret the story?
10. What do the siblings do with the key? How is this symbolic?
11. Who, or what, do you interpret the “they” to be in story?
12. What theme is Cortázar trying to convey in the story?

Close Reading: “House Taken Over” Psychological Context

Read the article to gain a greater understanding of the psychology behind Julio Cortázar’s main characters. Remember the steps to a close reading are on Page 2.

Smith, Melinda M.A. and Jeanna Segal Ph.D. “Schizophrenia: Signs, Types & Causes.” *Helpguide.org*. Nov. 2012. Web. 13 Jan. 2013.

Schizophrenia is a challenging disorder that makes it difficult to distinguish between what is real and unreal, think clearly, manage emotions, relate to others, and function normally. But that doesn't mean there isn't hope. Schizophrenia can be successfully managed. The first step is to identify the signs and symptoms. The second step is to seek help without delay and the third is to stick with the treatment. With the right treatment and support, a person with schizophrenia can lead a happy, fulfilling life.

What is schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia is a brain disorder that affects the way a person acts, thinks, and sees the world. People with schizophrenia have an altered perception of reality, often a significant *loss* of contact with reality. They may see or hear things that don't exist, speak in strange or confusing ways, believe that others are trying to harm them, or feel like they're being constantly watched. With such a blurred line between the real and the imaginary, schizophrenia makes it difficult—even frightening—to negotiate the activities of daily life. In response, people with schizophrenia may withdraw from the outside world or act out in confusion and fear.

Most cases of schizophrenia appear in the late teens or early adulthood. However, schizophrenia can appear for the first time in middle age or even later. In rare cases, schizophrenia can even affect young children and adolescents, although the symptoms are slightly different. In general, the earlier schizophrenia develops, the more severe it is. Schizophrenia also tends to be more severe in men than in women.

Although schizophrenia is a chronic disorder, there is help available. With support, medication, and therapy, many people with schizophrenia are able to function independently and live satisfying lives. However, the outlook is best when schizophrenia is diagnosed and treated right away. If you spot the signs and symptoms of schizophrenia and seek help without delay, you or your loved one can take advantage of the many treatments available and improve the chances of recovery.

Early warning signs of schizophrenia

In some people, schizophrenia appears suddenly and without warning. But for most, it comes on slowly, with subtle warning signs and a gradual decline in functioning long before the first severe episode. Many friends and family members of people with schizophrenia report knowing early on that something was wrong with their loved one, they just didn't know what.

In this early phase, people with schizophrenia often seem eccentric, unmotivated, emotionless, and reclusive. They isolate themselves, start neglecting their appearance, say peculiar things, and show a general indifference to life. They may abandon hobbies and activities, and their performance at work or school deteriorates.

Early Warning Signs

- Social withdrawal
- Hostility or suspiciousness
- Deterioration of personal hygiene
- Flat, expressionless gaze
- Inability to cry or express joy
- Inappropriate laughter or crying
- Depression
- Oversleeping or insomnia
- Odd or irrational statements
- Forgetful; unable to concentrate
- Extreme reaction to criticism
- Strange use of words or way of speaking

While these warning signs can result from a number of problems—not just schizophrenia—they are cause for concern. When out-of-the-ordinary behavior is causing problems in your life or the life of a loved one, seek medical advice. If schizophrenia or another mental problem is the cause, treatment will help.

Daniel's Story

Daniel is 21-years-old. Six months ago, he was doing well in college and holding down a part-time job in the stockroom of a local electronics store. But then he began to change, becoming increasingly paranoid and acting out in bizarre ways. First, he became convinced that his professors were “out to get him” since they didn't appreciate his confusing, off-topic classroom rants. Then he told his roommate that the other students were “in on the conspiracy.” Soon after, he dropped out of school.

From there, things just got worse. Daniel stopped bathing, shaving, and washing his clothes. At work, he became convinced that his boss was watching him through surveillance bugs planted in the store's television sets. Then he started hearing voices

telling him to find the bugs and deactivate them. Things came to a head when he acted on the voices, smashing several TVs and screaming that he wasn't going to put up with the "illegal spying" any more. His frightened boss called the police, and Daniel was hospitalized.

Signs and symptoms of schizophrenia

There are five types of symptoms characteristic of schizophrenia: delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech, disorganized behavior, and the so-called "negative" symptoms. However, the signs and symptoms of schizophrenia vary dramatically from person to person, both in pattern and severity. Not every person with schizophrenia will have all symptoms, and the symptoms of schizophrenia may also change over time.

Delusions

A delusion is a firmly-held idea that a person has despite clear and obvious evidence that it isn't true. Delusions are extremely common in schizophrenia, occurring in more than 90% of those who have the disorder. Often, these delusions involve illogical or bizarre ideas or fantasies. Common schizophrenic delusions include:

- **Delusions of persecution** – Belief that others, often a vague "they," are out to get him or her. These persecutory delusions often involve bizarre ideas and plots (e.g. "Martians are trying to poison me with radioactive particles delivered through my tap water").
- **Delusions of reference** – A neutral environmental event is believed to have a special and personal meaning. For example, a person with schizophrenia might believe a billboard or a person on TV is sending a message meant specifically for them.
- **Delusions of grandeur** – Belief that one is a famous or important figure, such as Jesus Christ or Napoleon. Alternately, delusions of grandeur may involve the belief that one has unusual powers that no one else has (e.g. the ability to fly).
- **Delusions of control** – Belief that one's thoughts or actions are being controlled by outside, alien forces. Common delusions of control include thought broadcasting ("My private thoughts are being transmitted to others"), thought insertion ("Someone is planting thoughts in my head"), and thought withdrawal ("The CIA is robbing me of my thoughts").

Hallucinations

Hallucinations are sounds or other sensations experienced as real when they exist only in the person's mind. While hallucinations can involve any of the five senses, auditory

hallucinations (e.g. hearing voices or some other sound) are most common in schizophrenia. Visual hallucinations are also relatively common. Research suggests that auditory hallucinations occur when people misinterpret their own inner self-talk as coming from an outside source.

Schizophrenic hallucinations are usually meaningful to the person experiencing them. Many times, the voices are those of someone they know. Most commonly, the voices are critical, vulgar, or abusive. Hallucinations also tend to be worse when the person is alone.

Disorganized Behavior

Schizophrenia disrupts goal-directed activity, impairing your ability to take care of yourself, your work, and interact with others. Disorganized behavior appears as:

- A decline in overall daily functioning
- Unpredictable or inappropriate emotional responses
- Behaviors that appear bizarre and have no purpose
- Lack of inhibition and impulse control

The so-called “negative” symptoms of schizophrenia refer to the absence of normal behaviors found in healthy individuals, such as:

- **Lack of emotional expression** – Inexpressive face, including a flat voice, lack of eye contact, and blank or restricted facial expressions.
- **Lack of interest or enthusiasm** – Problems with motivation; lack of self-care.
- **Seeming lack of interest in the world** – Apparent unawareness of the environment; social withdrawal.
- **Speech difficulties and abnormalities** – Inability to carry a conversation; short and sometimes disconnected replies to questions; speaking in monotone.

Genetic causes of schizophrenia

Schizophrenia has a strong hereditary component. Individuals with a first-degree relative (parent or sibling) who has schizophrenia have a 10 percent chance of developing the disorder, as opposed to the 1 percent chance of the general population.

But schizophrenia is only influenced by genetics, not determined by it. While schizophrenia runs in families, about 60% of schizophrenics have no family members with the disorder. Furthermore, individuals who are genetically predisposed to schizophrenia don't always develop the disease, which shows that biology is not destiny.

Analysis: Louis Wain – The Man Who Drew Cats

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U5ruNIIvXo8>

View the short YouTube video showing the progression of the famous Victorian artist Louis Wain's work. Art scholars say that you can see the effects of a long life spent battling paranoid schizophrenia. How do you interpret the change in his artwork? In the graphic organizer below, comment on the changes you see, and how they might connect to his illness.



Picture 1	Picture 2	Picture 3	Picture 4
Picture 5	Picture 6	Picture 7	Picture 8

Analysis: *A Beautiful Mind*

Watch the clip(s) from the movie *A Beautiful Mind*. What similarities do you see between the character of John Nash and those in "House Taken Over?"

John Nash A Beautiful Mind	Symptoms of Paranoid Schizophrenia	Similarities to "House Taken Over?"

Reinterpretation Take 2: "House Taken Over"

Now that you've learned about the conditions of paranoid schizophrenia, go back to "House Taken Over" and highlight any passages that support the idea that the story was written to highlight the struggles of mental illness.

Some things to consider:

- Feelings of paranoia or anxiety
- Fear of ordinary objects
- Delusional thinking

Close Reading: "House Taken Over" Historical Context

Read the article to gain a greater understanding of the time period in which Julio Cortázar wrote the short story. Remember the steps to a close reading are on Page 2.

Andreassi, Celina. "The History of Peronism." *The Argentina Independent*. 11

Oct. 2011. Web. 13 Jan. 2013.

Perón's First Government (1946-1951)

Dates fit the setting of the story (Sometime after 1939)

Peron was elected president in February 1946, winning 56% of the vote. He had the support of the Labour Party (which was formed by the unions after the 17th October) and a faction of the Radical party called UCR Junta Renovadora (Perón's eventual Vice President, Hortensio Quijano, was from this breakaway).

He'd run the presidential campaign around the slogan "Braden or Perón"—where Braden and the opposition parties centred around the Unión Democrática represented imperialism, while Perón maintained a nationalist stance.

The period 1946-1955 marked a turning point in the economic development of the country. Up until that point, the economy had been characterised by a model based around agricultural exports, dominated by large landowners and a strong intervention of foreign companies—British, and increasingly from the US. This model had started to weaken during the 1930's, but it was not until the mid-1940s that it was replaced by what became known as "import substitution industrialisation" (ISI).

This new economic paradigm was based around the development of labour-intensive, light industry to create jobs and produce domestic goods for the internal market. The State played an important role in channelling income from agricultural exports to industry, raising import tariffs, and nationalising foreign-owned companies such as the railways, gas, phone and electricity.

The political model that accompanied these economic changes was based on a class alliance between the workers, industrial employers, the Armed Forces and the Catholic Church. However, this alliance excluded the old landowners—"the oligarchy"—who would become the number one enemy of the new government.

During this period, Perón's charismatic wife, Eva Perón (or "Evita" as her followers called her) played a prominent role, and it is widely acknowledged that

A party of the common worker.

US vs. Them

Analysis: Dr. Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat*

Now that you've read about Perón's government and the changes it brought to Argentina, let's look at another allegory that you may be more familiar with. Use the graphic organizer below to chart the symbolic meaning of *The Cat in the Hat*.

Description of Illustration	Symbolic Elements	Symbolic Meaning

Reinterpretation: "House Taken Over"

Now that you've learned how to read stories for symbolic meaning and political allegory, go back to "House Taken Over" and highlight any passages that support the idea that the story was written in response to Peronism.

Some things to consider:

- Descriptions of class and money
- Feelings of being replaced in society
- Feeling old or outdated

Application: Symbolic Political Cartoon

Thinking about your new interpretation of "House Taken Over" and *The Cat in the Hat*, create a symbolic cartoon that can be read and understood on a literal level, but which also has a deeper symbolic meaning.

Brainstorming	
Story Element	Symbolism
Protagonist(s)	
Antagonist(s)	
Plot	
Climax	

Frame 1	Frame 2	Frame 3

Frame 4	Frame 5	Frame 6

Discussion: "House Taken Over" Interpretation Debate

Which side are you on? Listen to the arguments and evidence presented in the class discussion for each interpretation of the story. Use the graphic organizer to prepare your evidence for the upcoming essay.

Schizophrenia Evidence	Juan Peron Evidence

