

# House Taken Over



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JULIO CORTÁZAR

Julio Cortázar was born in Belgium, where his parents were involved in Argentine diplomatic work. As a young child, he lived in Belgium, Switzerland, and Spain before moving to his parents' home country, Argentina. His father left when he was six, and he spent the remainder of his childhood with his mother and sister, frequently bed-ridden due to ill health. Cortázar first worked as an elementary school teacher and completed coursework in languages and philosophy at the University of Buenos Aires. During this time, he published a collection of sonnets, a play, and several short stories. He continued to teach at several elementary schools and eventually as a Professor of French Literature at National University of Cuyo, though was forced to leave his role upon pressure from the Peron regime. He eventually emigrated to France in 1951, where he continued to live, though he traveled broadly until his death in 1984. Most of his major works were published during his years in Paris, including short story collections like *Bestiario* and novels like *Hopscotch*. Though he lived in France, Cortázar was deeply invested in the politics of Latin America, renouncing fascist and military dictatorships and supporting communist and socialist movements in Argentina, Chile, and Cuba.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"House Taken Over" is regarded as an anti-Peronist literary work. Peronism refers to the regime of Juan Peron, the president of Argentina from 1946-55. Peron rose to power after a military coup in 1943 and his tenure as president was considered a military dictatorship, where violence and manipulation were employed to maintain political power. The Peron administration was known for its nationalist and isolationist values, centering the people and concerns of Argentina and repudiating foreign affairs and influences. "House Taken Over" is most critical of this aspect of Peronism, which is mirrored in the narrator and Irene's compulsion to isolate themselves from the world outside their own home and flee from the unknown. This story was published in 1946, the same year Cortázar was pushed to leave his professorship at the National University of Cuyo by Peronist interests.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"House Taken Over" and many of Julio Cortázar's other writings belong to the magical realism movement. Magical realism incorporates elements of realism alongside the fantastical or surreal, and many trace its roots to Latin

American writers of the 20th Century. Other examples include Isabel Allende's *House of the Spirits*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Thousand Years of Solitude* and *In the Time of Cholera*, and Jorge Luis Borges' *The Aelph*. This style of fiction has spread widely in the last century. Notable works such as Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Haruki Murakami's *Wind-Up Bird Chronicles*, and Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* are all examples of magical realism.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** House Taken Over
- **When Written:** 1946
- **Where Written:** Buenos Aires, Argentina
- **When Published:** First published in 1946, though later included in the 1951 publication, *Bestiario*
- **Literary Period:** 20th Century Postmodern
- **Genre:** Magical Realism
- **Setting:** Buenos Aires, Argentina
- **Climax:** When the mysterious forces that took over the back of the house begin to move into the front rooms where the narrator and Irene have sequestered themselves, they decide to flee their home and abandon their belongings forever.
- **Antagonist:** An unnamed mysterious force
- **Point of View:** First Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**French Literature.** French literature is referenced frequently in "House Taken Over" as the narrator's favorite genre of books. Julio Cortázar worked as a Professor of French Literature in Mendoza, Argentina from 1944-46, during which time this short story was written.

**Eupen-et-Malmedy.** Some of the specimens in the stamp collection of the narrator's father come from the Eupen-et-Malmedy region in Belgium, a small German-speaking area in the east part of the country. Cortázar was born in Belgium just outside of Brussels.



## PLOT SUMMARY

The story's narrator lives with his sister, Irene, in their family's home. The **house** is large enough to hold at least eight people, but the siblings live alone because neither ever married. Together they keep a firm schedule, rising early to clean the dust that continually gathers in the giant house, especially in

the larger communal rooms at the back of the building. In the evenings, the narrator reads French literature, and his sister knits all kinds of useful garments, though she produces more than the two could ever wear. Irene never seems to leave the house, but the narrator runs into town occasionally on Saturdays to buy her new skeins of wool and to check the bookstore for new French books.

One night, when the narrator gets out of bed to make some tea, he hears a peculiar, muffled sound in the rear rooms. Believing an **invading force** has taken over the back of the house, he closes the door separating it from the front bedrooms, kitchen, and bathroom.

The siblings agree they will live in the front rooms only, and their home and life seems to shrink even further. At first, they miss the belongings they left in the lost portion of the house, but they adjust quickly. They no longer need to clean and they complete all their cooking in the morning, so they have little to do for most of the day. The narrator spends most of his evenings watching Irene knit. Their routine becomes so streamlined that they no longer need to think in order to survive, and they rarely speak; they merely exist, quietly. At night, the only sounds come from Irene's sleep-talking and the narrator's tossing and turning.

This simplistic, dismal existence appears as though it will continue indefinitely until the narrator gets up for a glass of water one night. Like before, he hears an odd sound, but this time in the front portion of the house. Irene notices that her brother has frozen in the hallway and gets up to listen with him. When the two are sure the mysterious presence is in either the kitchen or bathroom and coming closer, they run together to the vestibule, locking the entrance door behind them. Only then do they realize they have left with nothing but their clothing. Irene's knitting is caught in the door and cannot be rescued, and the narrator recalls with dismay the 15,000 pesos he left in his dresser. Still, they refuse to go back into the house, instead abandoning it forever. The narrator sees on his wristwatch that it is 11pm, then he and a weeping Irene walk off into the night.

his resignation to such an empty life. The narrator does have some exposure to the outside world at the beginning of the story, going into town on Saturdays to buy new skeins of yarn for his sister and to see if any new works of French literature have arrived at the bookstore. However, the siblings' world shrinks even further when the narrator hears the **mysterious presence** taking over the back rooms. He reacts immediately, bolting closed the door that separates the back rooms from the front area. In doing so, he loses access to all his books and his pipe, yet he does not leave the house to replace them. His desire to leave, even to run errands, seems to be overshadowed by his fear of the unknown. He remains sequestered to the small front rooms, spending most of his time watching Irene knit while rarely doing anything himself. He claims that he and Irene no longer even need to think because their lives are so rote. The only sign of his distress is an unconscious one: Irene tells him he thrashes in his sleep. When he believes he hears the interlopers begin to take the front of the house, the narrator runs away, pulling his sister behind him, still refusing to face the mysterious force.

**Irene** – Irene is the narrator's sister, and she lives alone with him in their **ancestral home**. At the beginning of the story, Irene spends her mornings cleaning the massive back rooms alongside her brother and her evenings committed to her knitting. Her brother notes that she rejected two prospective husbands for no discernable reason, and both she and her brother grow certain that they will be the end of their family's line. She is described as a person who bothers no one, who trusts her brother's taste in yarn, and who is a perfectionist in all she does. When the siblings close off the rear of the house to protect themselves from source of the strange sounds and no longer need to clean, she is content to spend nearly all her time knitting. Like her brother, Irene's only sign of dissatisfaction is the strange way she talks in her sleep. Still, she follows her brother's lead throughout the story, never second-guessing the nature of what he hears and allowing him to decide how they respond. Irene's character has less agency than her brother in the events of the story. In fact, she does not leave their home once, not until their final abandonment of the home when the narrator forces her to leave. She weeps as they stand together in front of the locked house, mourning the loss of everything she knows.



## CHARACTERS

**The Narrator** – The narrator lives alone in his family's home with his sister, Irene. He maintains a rigid routine of cleaning and cooking, and in the evening he likes to read French literature. He expresses frustration with the dust they are always cleaning, which resettles almost as soon as it is cleared. The narrator feels their efforts are useless and unending, and he blames this for him and Irene never finding spouses. He did once love a woman named Maria Esther, but she died before they could get married. There is bitterness in his delivery of this detail, which implies her death may be a motivating factor for



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



## HOME AND IDENTITY

In “House Taken Over,” the unnamed narrator and his sister Irene live together in their inherited family home, and their experiences depict how homes can both reflect and shape their inhabitants’ identities. The siblings’ house is filled with relics of the many generations who previously lived there, holding the rich family history that the narrator and Irene cherish. The way the siblings arrange and live in the house also reflects their isolated and rather mundane existence: with no spouses or children despite nearing their forties, the brother and sister lead comfortable but limited and repetitive lives. As such, they have no real need to utilize the communal spaces like the dining and living rooms, instead favoring the smaller front portion of the house that contains their own bedrooms. The larger rooms, in turn, reflect their disuse, constantly gathering dust that the narrator and Irene spend hours cleaning every day. And when an **unidentified presence** encroaches on these back rooms, the siblings choose to simply barricade this part of their house and live in the front rooms, ignoring the problem rather than investigating it. In this sense, the house actually seems to shrink, influencing how the characters behave and also mirroring how their lives become smaller and more isolated as they try to avoid the frightening uncertainty of whatever is trespassing in their home.

In all of these ways, the titular house isn’t *just* a house—it’s an extension of the narrator and Irene’s family history, personalities, and life choices. The intense, time-consuming upkeep that the house requires ensures that the siblings will continue living the same reclusive lifestyle that they’re comfortable with. They allow their whole identities to revolve around the space, first as their obsessive care of it thwarts their romantic prospects, and subsequently, when they shrink their lives to fit in the spaces that haven’t been invaded. In other words, the house leaves its mark on them just as much as they leave their mark on it. So, when the mysterious invader eventually takes over the front rooms too, and the siblings flee the house entirely, it is as if they have lost the whole of who they are.



## FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN

The house in which the narrator and sister Irene live is a space they have inherited, and the narrator explains that they have no need to work for pay either, as they live comfortably off the earnings from the family farm. Because of this generational wealth, the siblings do not need to strive in order to survive, nor do they have any need to participate in their community in Buenos Aires. Instead, they stay inside most of the time and keep to their routine, surrounded by the familiar and isolated from the outside world. Within their home, all of their efforts are fruitless: they wipe away dust that immediately returns, Irene knits with no end

goal in mind, and the narrator rereads old French literature. Instead of going out into the world to face uncertainty and take risks, they prefer a lifestyle that’s so insulated and repetitive that they no longer need to think. In fact, the narrator admits that they are hardly living at all, suggesting that avoiding the unknown in this way actually equates to a kind of mental or spiritual death.

When the back portion of the house, which the siblings rarely use themselves, is taken over by a **mysterious presence**, they have no interest in who (or *what*) has moved in or why. They merely lock the huge oak door that leads to the back rooms and cut their losses, preferring to make do with a smaller portion of the house than face the unknown. Indeed, neither the characters nor the reader ever find out who the invader is. When the invader eventually moves into the front rooms, the siblings give up the whole house, locking the door as they go, rather than facing any potential danger. Ultimately, though, neither their reclusiveness nor their wealth protect them from anything. They are left in the street with no money, possessions, or loved ones besides each other—their years of isolation have made them ill-equipped to face the world in which they suddenly find themselves. With this outcome, the story suggests that desperately trying to avoid the unknown and sticking with what is comfortable can be even more dangerous than taking risks and facing uncertainty head-on.



## THE PAST

As the narrator describes the ancestral house in Buenos Aires that he and his sister Irene share, it is clear that they greatly revere their home. While he admits that they live alone in a space that is much too large for them, he cherishes the history of past generations of their family who lived in the house. In devotion to this history, the adult siblings spend an inordinate amount of time tidying the vast rooms, trying to wipe away dust that only seems to be stirred up before resettling. So much of their time is spent cleaning, in fact, that the siblings never find time to marry or start families of their own—meaning that they have no one close to them to pass the house onto. Aside from cleaning, they spend their time doing the same things over and over again, rarely leaving the house. Irene knits constantly, sometimes reknitting the same garments if she finds a single flaw, while the narrator rereads the same French literature, as no new French literature books have arrived in Argentina since 1939. Their total fixation on preserving and revisiting the past prevents them from pursuing new interests or planning for the future.

The siblings’ inability to look to the future and or lead productive lives serves as a cautionary tale against orienting one’s existence around the past. They don’t have families of their own to fill the empty house, nor do they contribute anything of value to society, choosing to limit their lives to an ever-retreating past. The stubborn dust in the house thus

serves as a metaphor for their inability to keep time at bay; though Irene and the narrator try their best to eradicate the dust, it keeps coming, as does the future. This resistance to change also manifests when a **mysterious force** comes to claim the rear rooms of the house midway through the story, and the siblings react by trying to ignore the intruder and pretend that their lives are still the same as they've always been. But just as the dirt and the new inhabitants take over despite the siblings' efforts to stave them off, the present will inevitably replace the past. "House Taken Over" thus implies that clinging to the past is at best futile and at worst destructive. By the end of the story, the characters' refusal to plan for the future or accept the changes happening in their house leaves them with no home and no possessions, unable to pass on the house and family heirlooms that they devoted their lives to maintaining.

desire to be sheltered from the outside world, the mysterious presence taking over the house is symbolic of anything or anyone that might disrupt their isolation. When the narrator first hears sounds coming from the back rooms, he describes them as a noise akin to muffled conversation or a chair being knocked over. The nature of the presence is never revealed, but it bears the impression of human activity. Though the siblings live in a bustling city, this is the first occasion in the story where they might come into direct contact with others, not by choice but due to a breach in their intentionally insular existence. In rejecting this opportunity and cordoning off the rear wing, the narrator demonstrates how closed off he is to the idea of engaging with anyone other than Irene. Rather than giving up the space permanently, a more logical response to an intruder might be to call for help or to investigate himself, but the siblings do neither. They are so afraid of anyone they do not know or understand—and the changes that anything unfamiliar could bring—that they choose to lock the door on it instead, just as they have shut out potential relationships in the past.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### THE HOUSE

The narrator and Irene's house symbolizes their isolated, privileged existence. At first, they have access to the whole home, which contains relics and mementos from many generations before them. The house shelters them literally, but it also shelters them figuratively from the need to work or engage with their community, since they've inherited a home and therefore don't need to hustle to pay rent. As they work to maintain the home, they are seeking to preserve their family's memory and the generational wealth that allows them to remain separate from outsiders. However, their efforts are inadequate. Without families of their own to fill the large house, the communal living areas in the back of the building are empty and constantly coated in dust. This underused wing is the first place the **unidentified force** invades. In response, the siblings bolt the door and decide to live in the smaller front rooms, choosing to make do with less if it means they are protected from this interloper. They are sequestered in a space that is literally smaller, but their habits, activity, and engagement in the world are likewise diminished. When they perceive the house to be lost to them entirely, they abandon it rather than engage with the mysterious entity. Fleeing out of a desire to avoid contact with the unknown backfires, however—the siblings' ability to live an isolated existence is lost to them along with their home, and they are left exposed in the streets of Buenos Aires.



### THE MYSTERIOUS PRESENCE

While the siblings' **home** symbolizes their intense



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Bestiary: Selected Stories* published in 2020.

### House Taken Over Quotes

☝ 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 our childhood...Irene and I got used to staying in the house by ourselves, which was crazy, eight people could have lived in that space and not gotten in each other's way.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Irene

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 3

### Explanation and Analysis

The narrator and his sister inherited their home, and it has been in their family for many generations. They have lived in the house since childhood, and while it used to house many more people, they are now alone and dwarfed by its size.

They cherish the home for what it was in their childhood and their memories of sharing it with family, but the joy within the home does seem to have diminished. The days


where the house was filled with multigenerational family members and warmth are past, and it is only occupied by the two of them now.

To anyone other than them, the building would be worth more dismantled and sold for scrap materials, but the sentimental value of the home and the family history embedded in it keeps the siblings committed to preserving it as it is. In this way, the house becomes a symbol of the siblings' devotion to the past and their refusal to engage with the present or future.

☝ 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.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Irene

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 3

### Explanation and Analysis


The narrator explains the rigid routine that he and Irene follow each day without apparent deviation. Even with their many hours of daily cleaning, they can hardly keep up with the work. Considering that they hardly need any of the space, other people may have chosen to move into a place more appropriately sized, or they might have committed to populating the home with children or friends or other relations. But for the siblings, their commitment to the house oddly makes them *avoid* marrying and having children.

This shows once again how the weight of the past is keeping them from focusing on their future. The siblings do not wish to break the spell of the home as they remembered it, neither by leaving or filling it with families of their own. The specificity of the daily pattern described by the narrator is an extension of this desire to keep things the same in perpetuity. This need for things to remain the same is not only a force of habit, but a compulsion that has influenced key life choices the siblings have made.

☝ 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...we would topple it ourselves before it was too late.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Irene

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 3



### Explanation and Analysis


The narrator and Irene are aware that they are the end of their family line, but they seem to find it unbearable that their cherished family home might fall into the hands of someone else, particularly someone who won't appreciate its history or will use it for profit. For this reason, the narrator muses about destroying the house before they die so it doesn't fall into the hands of a distant cousin. Another solution to this would, of course, be to have children to whom they could pass down the house, but their fixation on the past is too great to do this. By their logic, then, it makes more sense to destroy the place they love.

In this way, the siblings' commitment to preserving their family home (which they prioritize above everything else, including their personal life and relationships) will eventually be the house's downfall. The narrator does not appear concerned with the irony of this, or bothered that it is both unsettling and unconventional for adult siblings to cohabit. Far more important to him is ensuring things do not change, not now or after his death. His adamantness that he and Irene would rather level their home is another sign of how fearful they are of the unknown.

☝ Irene never bothered anyone. Once the morning housework was finished, she spent the rest of the day on the sofa in her room, knitting. I couldn't tell you why she knit so much...Saturdays I went downtown to buy wool...I took advantage for 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.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Irene

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 3

### Explanation and Analysis


After many hours of cleaning the massive, empty home, the siblings each devote the rest of their time to their respective hobbies. It is significant that neither has a job, and their hobbies are largely futile. Irene does produce knit items, but she knits more garments than she or her brother could possibly wear. The narrator merely reads the same books repeatedly, with nothing to show for it. This is made possible by their inherited wealth that leaves them without the need to work or engage in the world in meaningful ways. In this way, their wealth is another thing that is keeping them from building future-oriented lives.

This passage also establishes that only the narrator leaves the house while Irene stays home, and his trips are infrequent at that. This, paired with the authoritative tone of the narration, suggest that he is the more dominant of the two siblings, which will become more apparent as the story continues, since he will be the one who hears the coming invaders and decides to relinquish first the rear and then the whole house to them without substantive input from Irene.

●● 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 in of the tooled-leather desk set. It's a lot of work to get it off with a feather duster; the notes rise and hang in the air, and settle again a minute later on the pianos and the furniture.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 4

### Explanation and Analysis

The dust that gathers in their house is yet another example of the futility of the siblings' efforts. They attempt to

preserve and honor the past with their time-consuming cleaning, but the dust—which comes in from the streets of a city they do not truly engage with—keeps coming. This hints at the futility of trying to lock out the outside world and keep everything the same as it has always been.

The dust is also most unmanageable in the rear rooms of the house like the dining room, library, and family room, which are closest to the street. They are also the portion of the house that would have been dedicated to communal living if the narrator and Irene had made their own families, but instead are rarely used. The siblings' inability to keep the dust at bay in the back rooms is a symptom of those rooms atrophying from disuse. It is unsurprising, then, that these are the rooms that are first lost to them when the mysterious presence begins its invasion.

●● 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... I hurled myself against the door before it was too late and shut it, leaned on it with the weight of my body... I ran the great bolt into place, just to be safe.

"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...

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

**Related Characters:** The Narrator, Irene (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 4-5

### Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator gets up in the night to make himself some *mate*, he hears muffled noises in the rear rooms that he assumes are that of an intruder. The sound appears to be coming closer, so he slams and bolts the door, effectively surrendering the back wing of their home.

The narrator is the one who decides to bar the door, but Irene does not question it in the least. It is peculiar that

neither the narrator nor Irene have any second thoughts about relinquishing their home, given that they have oriented their whole lives around their devotion to the place.


In fact, up to this moment, the narrator has spent the entirety of the story explaining how all their efforts have gone into maintaining their beloved family home at the cost of every other aspect of their lives, but still, the decision to barricade the back of the house is instantaneous. Both he and Irene have a mutual understanding that under no circumstance would they confront the unknown presence, regardless of what is lost because of that avoidance. Their desire to remain isolated is simply so extreme that it overrides the loss of those rooms and the cherished items within them.

☞ 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...But there were advantages, too. The cleaning was so much simplified that, even when we got up late...by eleven we were sitting around with our arms folded...

We were fine, and little by little, we stopped thinking. You can live without thinking.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Irene

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 5

### Explanation and Analysis

For the days following the ceding of the rear wing, the siblings mourn, mostly because of the things that they had left in those rooms. The biggest loss is the narrator's entire collection of books, but there are many other artifacts of their past that they have given up. But they do not consider going into the city to get replacements—the narrator no longer mentions leaving the house at all.

Because the narrator and Irene have shaped their identities around their home, their identities shrink in response to their shrunken living space. They rarely talk and they no longer even need to think, according to the narrator. They live without thinking, which is to say they live with effort or meaning or intention.

Many people read "House Taken Over" as an allegory of

Argentine dictator Juan Perón's rise to power. It's possible to see the siblings' bafflingly passive acceptance of this loss of their freedom and history (their house) as an echo of the way that many people simply accept their diminished freedoms when a dictator is consolidating power. Indeed, rather than contemplating the meaning of their losses or fighting back, they instead choose to focus on the benefits of their minimized living quarters, which allows them to continue living as normally as possible. When the narrator admits that he and Irene have stopped thinking, and that it's possible to live without thinking, it's a fairly direct acknowledgement that democracies are endangered when their subjects refuse to reckon with threats to their liberty or alarming changes in their lives.

☞ 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 our section," Irene said.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator, Irene (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 6

### Explanation and Analysis

After Irene and the narrator have settled into their smaller, thoughtless existence, there comes another night where the narrator rises to get himself something to drink. Once more, he hears the strange, muffled noises of the unidentified intruder, but this time they are on their side of the thick oak door and coming closer.

Without saying a word, the siblings run from the house together, again failing to confront, let alone identify, the invading force. Just as before, their fear of the unknown and refusal to engage with others eclipses their sentimental devotion to their home.

Standing before the locked door, they can no longer hear the indistinct sounds of the force that has taken over their house. It is curious that the noises should disappear so quickly, and it is possible that they are psychological projections—phantoms of their biggest fears made real by the intensity of their emotions. Whether the intruder is real

or imagined, despite the quiet on the other side of the door, the narrator and Irene do not attempt to go back in. What little space they had left in their home is gone.



“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 wrist watch 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 looked 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.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator, Irene (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 6-7

### Explanation and Analysis

The siblings realize that, in their haste to evade contact with the mysterious presence, they have left the house with nothing but their clothing—they have no money, no family heirlooms, and even Irene's knitting must be left behind. They stand before the house—it is the first time in the story Irene has left their home—overcome with emotion. Irene cries, and the narrator is frozen in his grief.

The time he sees on his watch, 11 P.M., indicates that they stand on the precipice of a new day, just as they stand on the edge of a whole new life and identity. However, because they are two people who have been so attached to the past and so adamantly averse to change, the tone of this final scene is not hopeful. They are exposed, ousted from the literal and figurative protections of their inherited wealth. As painful as this is for both siblings, the narrator locks the gate and seals away the past, throwing away the only key.





## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## HOUSE TAKEN OVER

An unnamed narrator and his sister Irene live in Buenos Aires together in the family home they inherited. **The house** holds the memories of many generations that came before them. It's old and spacious, big enough to hold eight people comfortably. The siblings follow an extremely regular routine, waking early to clean the expansive space until lunch, which they always have at noon.

Maintaining **the house** is such difficult work that the narrator and Irene blame it for their never marrying—Irene rejected two suitors, and the narrator's former partner died before they could get engaged. Both siblings are nearing their forties, and because neither has children, they are certain that the family line will end with them. The narrator is afraid that when they die, the house will be passed on to an unknown relative who will sell it for scrap. So, he and his sister may eventually have the house torn down.

Irene is an unassuming person; after the daily cleaning is finished, she spends all her time knitting. She knits useful things, but often she will unravel and reknit any garment that is not perfect. Though neither sibling leaves **the house** often, the narrator enjoys going into town occasionally to pick out new skeins for yarn for Irene, who appreciates his taste. While there, he will also stop into the bookstore to see if there are any new volumes of French literature in stock. There never are, nor have there been any in Argentina since 1939, so he spends his time reading the books he already has.

The narrator doesn't consider himself important, so he wants to focus on **the house** and Irene. He wonders what Irene would do without her knitting and observes that while books can always be reread, once a sweater is complete, there's nothing more to do. One day he finds a large stash of Irene's finished knitted pieces that have clearly been untouched for a long time, and he does not understand what she hopes to do with them. There is enough to stock her own store, but they have no need for money, as they make a good amount of passive income from their inherited family farms. Though the narrator believes Irene knits excessively, he feels great joy watching her work.

*From the first sentence, the siblings' home is established as a holder of ancestral memory. Both the house and the family were once grand, but now the two remaining members of the family are dwarfed by this enormous house (which is an emblem of their past), showing how their past might be stifling to them.*



*The narrator and Irene have been prioritizing the house over their romantic lives, which the narrator here seems to bemoan—but as the story goes on, the possibility will arise that they've been using the house as an excuse to stay away from others for many years. In fact, their attachment to their family home is so intense that they refuse to let anyone else have it, planning to destroy it before their deaths.*



*Since cleaning the house only takes about half their day, the narrator and Irene have to figure out how to fill the other half—notably, they do so by creating new repetitive chores for themselves (knitting, shopping, etc.). Their lives seem completely insulated from other people and neither of the siblings ever do anything new, choosing to spend all their free time repeating the same patterns, which hints at the aversion to the unknown that propels their decision making later.*



*While the narrator implies that he considers himself to be less important than Irene, his commentary is laced with judgement of Irene's knitting. He thinks rereading books makes more sense than knitting useless garments, but actually neither activity seems more or less meaningful or productive than the other. Irene does seem to care more about creating something flawless, but it's not clear to what end. Their inherited wealth allows for this lack of productivity, which is the same entitlement that drives and enables their desire to live in isolation from their community.*



The narrator affectionately describes the layout of their **house**. One enters through a tiled vestibule with an iron gate. Next are the siblings' bedrooms, which sit opposite a small living area. Further in are the turnoffs for the bathroom and kitchen, and just past there lies a massive oak door. Behind it is the bigger part of the house, containing additional bedrooms and communal spaces, including the dining room, larger living room, and library. This portion of the home is the closest to the Rodriguez Pena, a main thoroughfare in Buenos Aires. When the door closes off these rooms, the narrator imagines that he and Irene live in a normal-sized apartment.

*The layout of the house is important, as it breaks the space into two main portions: one is essential living spaces for the siblings, and one is extra communal space that nobody uses. The home is a metaphor for the siblings' psyche, with the most secure and private rooms that they share coming first, the rooms that encapsulate the life of a big, active family relegated the back, and beyond the rear of the house lies the bustling city. In the same way, Irene and the narrator's relationship is at the forefront of their lives, followed by the memory of a family that they try to preserve, and finally the dusty outside world they try to keep out. The unused family rooms are a buffer between the siblings and the city, just as their attachment to the past keeps them from creating their own families and futures.*



With so much unused space, the grime from dusty streets collects everywhere, especially the rear rooms. Though the narrator and Irene clean daily, they seem only to disturb the dust momentarily. Soon after, it settles back onto the furniture.

*It is significant that the spaces in the home that represent family time and communal living are the ones that the narrator and Irene can't seem to keep clean. The siblings no longer have any desire for a romantic relationship or to continue their family line, so the space that represents that portion of their psyche is continually coated in dust coming in from the main road. This dust is an outside force disturbing their insular life, and it foreshadows the coming intruder.*



One night, while Irene is knitting, the narrator gets up to brew *maté*. Before he turns into the kitchen, he hears faint noises from the rear rooms that sound like buzzing conversation or someone knocking things around. He hears the sound moving into the hallway and toward the oak door that leads into the back part of the house, so he closes and locks the door on the **mysterious presence**. When he tells Irene that "they've taken over," the siblings decide to permanently bar off the back portion of the home. They are sad to lose things they left there, like the narrator's French literature and pipe or Irene's slippers and Hesperidin, but otherwise they merely shift their routine to fit into the smaller area.

*The family rooms are the first ones that the unidentified force invades. Interestingly, the noises that the narrator hears sound like the noises that a family would make, so what might have been a welcome aspect of life (having children and extended family) has been reconfigured as a threat. The narrator's immediate reaction is to assume ill-intent, moving to block out what he assumes is a malicious force. This indicates both a lack of trust in people and a belief that others wish to take what belongs to him. Up to this point, the siblings' repetitive hobbies and dedication to maintaining their family dwelling imply a lack of interest in new things, but their refusal to engage with the invader to the point that they are willing to lose part of their home illustrates how adverse they are to the unknown. In addition, many people read this story as an allegory of Juan Perón's rise to power (he was the Argentinian president at the time the story was written). When Perón was coming to power, he began taking people's rights away, and Cortazar was disturbed at how easily he thought Argentinians accepted this. In this light, the siblings' odd decision to simply lose access to most of their house rather than confronting the reality of the unsettling presence that has appeared seems like an allegory for the way that people's impulse to deny reality can enable them to accept monstrous things.*



With no need to spend the morning maintaining the communal rooms behind the door, the siblings have much more time on their hands. Irene is happy because she can knit, and the narrator spends time reordering his father's stamp collection since he doesn't have books to read. Neither seems interested in going out to find replacements for their lost items. They also adjust their schedule so all cooking is completed by early afternoon, allowing them to spend nearly the entire day in Irene's room. Eventually, they are so tuned in to their routine that they no longer need to think at all. But the narrator asserts that thinking is not needed to live.

The narrator often hears Irene talking in her sleep in a strange, disembodied voice that he imagines comes straight from her dreams. She, in turn, hears him thrashing in his sleep most nights. Aside from these nocturnal noises, the house remains quiet. In the daytime, there are the soft noises of knitting or stamp collection pages being flipped. When the siblings are in the kitchen or bathroom, they make excessive noise with the dishes or talk loudly so that they cannot hear anything coming from the rooms on the other side of the wall. Any displeasure with their reduced lifestyle is reflected only in their fitful sleeping habits.

The narrator wakes in the silence of the night and gets up for a glass of water, much the same way he did the night they lost the back rooms. In the hallway, still within Irene's eyesight, he freezes when he hears the odd muffled noises of the **mysterious presence** once more, this time coming from the bathroom or kitchen.

Noticing the narrator's reaction, Irene gets up. They listen as the sounds get closer. Without discussing it, they flee at the same time. Standing in the vestibule behind the closer iron grate, they both realize they have lost **the house** entirely. "They've taken over our section," Irene says. The piece of knitting Irene was working on is still in her hand, though the skein she was working from is trapped in the house. She abandons it and the unfinished garment.

*Because the house functions as a symbol of the siblings' identities, when they lose the rear rooms, their very lives seem to shrink; they streamline their routines, stop leaving the house, and rarely speak. No real effort, let alone thought, goes into their day-to-day lives any longer. This loss of both identity and quality of life is the price of letting aversion to the unfamiliar drive their decision making. It is significant that they accept this loss without any meaningful reaction or grief, as if they believe that sacrificing some freedoms is worthwhile if they can preserve their comfort in what's familiar.*



*The only sounds at night come from the siblings' fitful sleep, which could suggest that the noise the narrator heard was never there to begin with. Instead, it could be a projection of the siblings' fears. It also indicates that while the narrator and Irene may not need to think to function, both are experiencing subconscious turmoil that surfaces when they are asleep. Whether or not the sounds the narrator claims to hear are real, the subtext of this shared unrest underscores the psychological conflict at the center of their decisions.*



*Though the siblings have adapted their daily lives so that they can preserve their insular existence, the unidentified force returns. No no amount of sacrifice can keep the world fully at bay, whether it comes in the form of dust or a cryptic presence. If that force is viewed as an imagined projection of the siblings' fear, then its reemergence illustrates the way that acting out of fear may address the initial situation, but the fear itself has not been rooted out. The presence returns because it is not an actual threat, but merely a symptom of unaddressed internal dysfunction.*



*Just as Irene must let go of her knitting because the ball of yarn attached to it is trapped in the door, the siblings' attachment to the past and to their family is trapped inside with the home. Since they will not open the door to confront the intruder, they must leave it entirely. As before, rather than face the invading force, the siblings' fear of the unknown is so great that they abandon their home entirely. The thematic significance is the same if the mysterious presence is real or imagined. Throughout their lives, they have centered their identities around an elite, successful family that no longer exists. This leaves them so uninterested in their community and distrustful of others that they do not care what or who is in their home. They will give anything to maintain their seclusion, no matter the price.*



Standing alone outside **the house**, the narrator and Irene realize they have nothing but what they are wearing. There are 15,000 pesos left in the narrator's dresser drawer, but it is beyond his reach now. He looks at his wristwatch and notes that it's 11 p.m. Then, he and Irene embrace, and he sees that she's crying. Before they leave their home forever, the narrator locks the door and then throws his house key in the gutter. He does not want anyone to go in after they are gone, neither to loot their belongings nor to encounter the **mysterious presence** that took over their home.

*Ultimately, their fear of the unknown costs the siblings everything. Standing in front of the house with nothing, they have an opportunity to overcome their debilitating fear and reclaim their home, but instead the narrator throws the key in the gutter, making it impossible for them to return. He feels disheartened by all they have left behind and concerned by his sister's grief, but he still does not demonstrate any awareness of their new reality. Their inherited home, as well as the sense of history and the identity it symbolizes, are lost, leaving them destitute and exposed in a way they have never been. The very privilege that insulated them now leaves them fully unprepared to participate in the real world.*





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