

# CHARLES by Shirley Jackson

## Summary and Analysis

### Fill in the missing words:

adjusting - denouement - Eventually - exaggeration - expense - harasses – lapses - mischief - reverts - sublimation - twist - yells -

Little Laurie, who has just started kindergarten, keeps his parents in suspense with more or less shocking stories about his fellow-pupil Charles, who \_\_\_\_\_ his teacher and classmates with his aggressive behaviour. Charles, for instance, hits the teacher, keeps pounding his feet on the floor during storytime, or \_\_\_\_\_ in class during story hour. Punishment obviously has little effect on him. Fearing that "all this toughness" may have a "bad influence" (3112-13) on Laurie, his mother "passionately" wishes to contact Charles' mother at the first Parent-Teachers meeting (3134-36), but her plan comes to nothing because her baby's cold keeps her from going. \_\_\_\_\_, Laurie's daily reports about Charles begin to dominate both parents' consciousness. By the third week of kindergarten "Charles" has become a synonym for any kind of \_\_\_\_\_ or damage done within the family (32 16-20). After what seems a time of reformation in Charles when his teacher calls him her "helper" (32 34), Charles \_\_\_\_\_ to his usual misbehaviour. Among other things, he makes a little girl say an evil word (33 3) and later says it himself "three or four times" (33 14). Anxiously, Laurie's mother attends the second Parent-Teachers meeting where no one, however, mentions Charles. When she approaches the teacher after the meeting and introduces herself as Laurie's mother, she is informed primly that her little son had "a little trouble \_\_\_\_\_, the first week or so" (33 35), but now has become "a fine little helper. With occasional lapses, of course". Innocently Laurie's mother tries to attribute her son's \_\_\_\_\_ to "Charles' influence", but the teacher informs her that they "don't have any Charles in the kindergarten". It is only at this point that she realizes that Laurie — give or take an \_\_\_\_\_ or two — has been describing his own behaviour at school. One can only imagine her shock on realizing that she herself is "Charles' mother".

The action of the story covers a time span of a little more than four weeks. The story is told by the mother, as first-person narrator. She is both observer of the action and closely involved in it. Her feelings, thoughts and reactions during these four weeks are related directly with no trace of hindsight. Consequently, at no point is the truthfulness of Laurie's reports about

Charles called into question. For both parents Charles is a 'real' figure; up to the \_\_\_\_\_ his existence is felt as a constant menace to their little son.

Psychologically speaking, Laurie's daily performances might be seen as an intelligent form of \_\_\_\_\_: for quite a while Laurie successfully transforms his difficulties in adjusting to the social demands of kindergarten life into material for his fight for recognition at home. The reasons for his failure to "adjust" can only be speculated on. The first paragraph suggests that Laurie had acquired certain notions of 'grown-upness' and independence (presumably nurtured by his loving parents) which inevitably clashed with the mild forms of school discipline usual even at the kindergarten stage.

Seen from the reader's perspective, the story makes pleasant reading, because Laurie's tactics will soon be seen through. While the narrator in the story is blind to what is really going on, the reader step by step becomes aware of the improbability of Laurie's reports. The point at which one realises that Laurie is tricking his parents will, of course, vary; but from then on one knows — or suspects — more than the narrator (dramatic irony) and is amused at her \_\_\_\_\_.

The suspense lies in the question: "How long can Laurie go on tricking his parents?"

Consequently, the \_\_\_\_\_ at the end of the story comes as some sort of confirmation rather than as a surprise. The blow is dealt to Laurie's mother, not to the reader. For the juvenile reader, the charm of this story probably lies in a humorous reversal of traditional roles: Parents, by convention thought to be intellectually superior to their children are outwitted by the imagination and artistry of a clever little nipper.

## **Unit I**

### **The Contents**

#### **1. Central character and narrator**

*Who do you think is the main character in the story? Give reasons why.*

*Laurie:*

*Laurie's mother*

## 2. Comprehension questions (plot)

What changes does Laurie's mother observe in her son the day he starts kindergarten?

What does Laurie report about Charles in the following two weeks? How do Laurie's parents respond to these reports? How does Charles influence life in Laurie's family?

In what way does Charles' conduct change during the third and fourth week? How do Laurie's parents interpret this change? How does Charles behave shortly before the second PTA meeting? What course does the second PTA meeting take for Laurie's mother

## 3. Group work

**Group A:** Have a second close reading of the story. - Note down in brief, following the chronological order, all the information you get about **Charles' behaviour** and about his **teacher's** corresponding **reactions**. Enter your findings into a chart, as follows:

time		Charles	teacher
week	day		
1st	Monday Tuesday	was fresh hit the teacher	spanked Charles spanked Charles again

**Group B:** Work through the text and note down all relevant information on **Laurie's behaviour** in outline form (entering the details into a similar chart).

First Week:

- Laurie starts wearing blue jeans.
- He goes off to kindergarten without waving goodbye.
- On returning, he shouts and slams the door, [etc.]

**Group C:** Summarize the corresponding reactions of Laurie's parents (entering the details into a similar chart).

- Laurie's mother notices that an era of her life has come to an end.

— She tries to react casually.

— Laurie's father asks what he learned at school, [etc.]

## **Unit II**

### **Humour and Irony**

1. Charles' identity

*Who is Charles? — How do you know?*

2. The narrator's perspective

*When did Laurie's mother realize?*

3. The reader's perspective

*When did you realize Laurie was not telling the whole truth?*

4. Dramatic irony

*How did your knowledge affect your enjoyment of the story?*

5. Surface humour

*What else is funny about the story?*

## Unit III

### The Characters

#### 1. Reader's sympathies

*Which character do you sympathize with (laugh at) most? Why?*

*Try to explain why Laurie/Charles behaved as he did.*

#### 3. Parental attitudes

*What do you think of the way the parents deal with Laurie?*